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Peter Field

CANYON HIDE-OUT

The entire range would explode into violence unless Pat Stevens uncovered its villainous secret!

THE COMPLETE BOOK

PAT STEVENS HAD A HUNCH— "What is the canyon like up ahead?" Pat asked, still uneasy about the place.

"It narrows," came the wrangler's quick reply. "You've seen the best of it—and all M Bar cattle."

"We could go on a ways—"

"What for? Look, Stevens, there ain't a thing wrong here. You're barkin' up the wrong tree this time!"

Pat wasn't so sure and went on. Suddenly he stopped and peered through some obstructing branches at a beefy three-year-old.

"What yuh starin' at, Stevens?"

"Take a look at the brand on that critter," Pat murmured. "If it's M Bar, I'm a Hottentot!"

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CANYON HIDE-OUT

PETER FIELD

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CANYON HIDE-OUT

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Canyon Hide-Out

1.

Oh-h, the cowpunch loves the whistle of his rope
As he gallops over the plains,
An-n-nd the stagedriver loves the popper of his whip
And the rattle of his Concord chains—

THREE WEARY MEN followed the dim sandy trail that wound on under the bull pines, which stood motionless in the golden late-afternoon sunlight. Long empty miles lay behind them, and more were ahead. This was the forest fringe of Colorado's wild West Slope; beyond rose the long wooden ridges, offering relief from the heat of the high plains.

Pat Stevens and grizzled, lanky Ezra rode stirrup to stirrup, their tapaderos softly brushing. They found nothing to say. Pat's lean, bronzed face shone with perspiration under the wide, curled-brim Stetson, and dust had caked Ezra's furrowed, melancholy visage; only his single eye, alert and thoughtful by turns, was as sharp and bright as ever. In the rear, attesting the stubborn self-reliance of these men and their distance from home, trundled the camp wagon, drawn by a long-eared quadruped upholstered in mouse gray, and with a third saddle horse haltered to the tail gate.

Pudgy, stubble-jawed Sam Sloan was perched on the rickety seat, the lines hooked over a cocked knee. Swatting absently at gnats with one hand, eyes squinted nearly shut, Sam was crooning to himself in a nasal singsong:

So-o-o we'll all pray the Lord that we'll be saved,
And we'll keep the Golden Rule;

Bu-ut I'd ruther be home with my feet on the stove
Than to monkey with this goddam mule.

Having fidgeted through as much of this as he could stand, Ezra suddenly swiveled in the saddle, his glance baleful. "Shut yore meat trap, will yuh?" he roared wrathfully. "Hangin' back to stay with the wagon's bad enough without yore bellerin' . . . yuh danged, profane old man!"

Sloan grunted like a man kicked treacherously in the stomach. He sat up promptly, glaring at his partner. Sharp wits wide-awake, his answer was a sarcastic guffaw shrewdly calculated to enrage Ezra.

"Look who's talkin'," Sam scoffed. "Thought for a minute I'd strayed into a parcel of strangers. I didn't go for to make Aunt Ez blush—"

That his bantering had scored was to be read in Ezra's choleric features. The latter had no chance to loose his return blast.

"Can it, you two," Pat Stevens ordered wearily. Lithe and broad-shouldered, with level steely regard, he had an authority of manner which left no doubt that he was the guiding spirit here, although by far the youngest in years. "We're all hot, dirty and tired, but wrangling won't improve matters."

"Well—how about Ez changin' places with me, and pushin' this dang rig awhile, then?" Sam fired out, by no means cowed.

Ezra roared his contempt for such a suggestion, but his very violence sounded hollow. Pat only watched him with a grim smile.

"Sam's stayed with the wagon all day, Ez," he reminded. "Why not spell him—unless you aim to drive tomorrow?"

Making it plain that he harbored no such intention, Ezra reluctantly gave in. The change was made, and Sloan swung into the saddle and rode up beside Pat with a gusty sigh.

"That's better," he grunted, his frosted jowls split in a grin as he glanced slyly back at Ezra, grumbling on the wagon.

Their common condition of frayed nerves was not without

cause. For days past, they had worked in the hardest way. Lured by a juicy selling price, Sam and Ezra had disposed of a sizable herd of two- and three-year-olds from their Bar ES horse ranch in Powder Valley to a shrewd dealer in Durango. Delivery had been stipulated in the deal; and for the sake of action, as well as a sneaking affection for the two crotchety old horned toads with whom he had spent years, and who fondly believed they had raised him, Pat Stevens had left the Lazy Mare ranch in competent hands and declared himself in on the drive.

The long trip had been completed successfully, the spirited horses turned over to the buyer. A large sum of money had changed hands. Only yesterday, in Durango, the broken-down ranch cook hired to accompany them had been paid off and had quit, necessitating Sam's taking to the wagon.

Now they were on their way home. The raw plains to the west had been left behind; the jumbled, upthrust Rockies loomed ahead. Only an isolated cowtown or two lay before them on this out-of-the-way and little-used trail.

Sam cocked an eye at the sun, hanging low over the flat-topped mesas miles away. "Gettin' late," he observed.

Pat nodded. "We'll soon hit Lost Trail. Wolf Creek is only a couple of miles beyond."

The trail climbed a long grade through thinning timber, then dipped downward into a narrow valley. Rocky crests, hemming it in, cut off the mountain breeze and the valley lay still and dreaming, the air warm. Ten minutes later they found themselves at the upper end of a little backwoods settlement.

Log false fronts rose on either side of the short single street; hipshot horses switched flies at sagging hitch rails; smoke spiraled from a chimney. A booted man, his vest open and drooping, watched their approach from a cabin door.

This was Lost Trail.

"Hick burg," Sam commented briefly.

Pat shot him a warning glance. "Don't fool yourself." He kept his voice down. "A rough life makes for rough men."

Sam was unimpressed. "Think so?"

The other shrugged. "Just don't try to prove me wrong." He grinned.

Before a place whose worn steps and batwing doors proclaimed it a bar, both hitched their horses. Behind them Ezra hauled in the mule.

"Now what?" he protested suspiciously.

Pat waved him on. "Keep going, Ez. You can pitch camp at the creek. Sam and I'll grab a drink and shove after—we'll be there almost as soon as you."

Ezra's mutter sounded blistering, but after a moment he pushed on, still talking to himself. Pat and his stocky friend ducked under the rail and stepped into the saloon, slapping the dust from their pants.

No lamps had been lit in the Only Chance, and the light here was shadowy and dim. But several men were ranged at either end of the bar. Pat and Sam bellied up politely at the gap in the middle, only to find that they had inadvertently stepped into something.

A man at the lower end held the tense attention of all in the place, banging his glass and cursing doggedly to punctuate a steady flow of bitter talk. Half-drunk and on the prod, he seemed to be trying to work himself up to the point of action.

Having indicated his choice to the bartender with a gesture, Pat poured his drink and Sam's. In unison they went through the ritual of bottoms-up and refill. Standing there, Pat glanced casually down the bar for a swift take of the troublemaker.

Two-bit rancher, on the rocks and scraping bottom, Pat sized him up. Forty, maybe. Grizzled blond stubble of a beard, aquiline nose, and prominent shovel chin. A dogged, stiff-necked, slow-witted man needling himself to righteous rage, he was directing his scurrilous talk against the high-handed encroachments of a larger ranch which had pushed him to the verge of ruin. Pat caught the name of Crow Track —plainly a brand the men hated and despised.

"Lay off, Kyle," one of the man's companions muttered. But Kyle was past reasoning with. As his cursing droned on,

only rising in pitch, his uneasy companions shot more than one wary glance down the bar.

Pat's eye drifted the other way and at once picked out the object of Kyle's attack. This elderly, iron-faced cowman standing half in shadow at the rear of the place, could only be the prosperous rancher against whom Kyle's savage arraignment was directed. Undoubtedly the biggest, perhaps the only big, rancher on this range, the owner of Crow Track stood stocky, foursquare, and grim of visage, but otherwise apparently ignoring the tirade, and it was his tall, rawboned companion who gazed, steadily and bleakly, toward the little group up the bar.

A worn and shiny star sagged from the pocket of this man's shirt. A soft grunt from Sam signified that he too had observed that. Indeed, the situation seemed all too plain. The big stockman, flinty and powerful, backed by the local sheriff—ranged against the impotent shoestring herder, airing his unredressed wrongs!

Though he was by no means more than ordinarily cautious, Sam Sloan abruptly lost interest. He finished his drink, shoved the jigger back and would have turned to leave if Pat's seemingly accidental jab in his ribs had not stayed him. Sam eased around, back to the bar, with a catlike flow of muscle in the pudgy frame.

Kyle's anger had risen to feverish intensity now. "Leave me alone!" he blared, tossing aside the restraining hand of a friend at the end of a particularly violent outburst. "I'll speak my piece about that damned Crow Track—an' Dunk Pomerene too! He can't smash Lafe Kyle an' not hear about it, Sheriff Crotty or no Sheriff Crotty. I've a mind to drag the old pirate down with me!"

He whipped about, trembling all over, to rake Pomerene with smoking eyes. "Got somethin' to say, Crow Track?" he snarled.

Breaking at last from his austere immobility, Dunk Pomerene barely touched Kyle with a shriveling glance. "Outside—drunk!" he rumbled scathingly.

Kyle's fury boiled over. Sufficiently liquored and apoplec-

tic with rage to be lost to all caution, he yanked out his gun and plunged blindly forward as if he meant to barge bodily into Pomerene and run him down.

Pat Stevens had braced himself for this moment. He did not pause to question his course. At the instant of Kyle's move, Pat sprang to the center of the floor.

"Take him, Sam!" he rapped out sharply.

Forced to pass between the two in his blind rush, Kyle appeared not to observe them at all. With lightning precision, Sloan's gun whipped out of the holster and slashed down as the infuriated rancher plunged past. Its barrel landed alongside of his head with an audible thwack.

Kyle came unstrung in a twinkling, his limbs going lax. He would have slumped to the floor had not Pat's swooping arms encircled his waist and held him upright. He was out cold.

Heavy silence descended on the bar, broken by the soft scrape of boots as Sheriff Crotty moved quietly forward. "Nice work, stranger." The lawman's gruff tone was unruffled. "Your quick thinkin' saved me considerable trouble. I'll take Lafe off your hands now."

Occupied as he was, Pat could only stand firm; but his mouth twitched as Sam stepped in front of him, almost accidentally. He spoke across the little man's shoulder, pleasant but cool.

"What's the charge, Sheriff?"

"Oh, we'll keep Lafe out of harm's way till he sobers up—"

There was restless movement among Kyle's friends at this, but Pat did not glance around. Sam was watching them, his gun still held carelessly in his pudgy hand.

"No need of that," Pat told the sheriff smoothly. "Kyle won't give anyone trouble for a while—unless Pomerene, there, insists on preferring some sort of a charge." His tone said that it would be a trumped-up one.

Thus drawn into the talk, Dunk Pomerene waved a disposing hand without speaking. Seeing that, Pat nodded as if to himself. With no more delay, he half-dragged Kyle toward the door.

"Ought to be somebody who'll take him home," he remarked.

Accepting this cue, on the saloon porch Kyle's friends took charge of him, apologetic but cool. They seemed glad to get out of a tight jam so easily. Pat sized them up as all small ranchers of Kyle's own stripe and concluded they would make sure of the man's safety.

With a hitch at his pants, Pat turned back inside to finish his drink. It was quiet in the bar. The tension had relaxed for the moment and men drifted out at the door. Suddenly a low, level voice sounded at Pat's shoulder.

"Don't reckon I know you, son."

Turning, Pat looked into the calm gray eye of Dunk Pomerene.

"Stevens is the name." He nodded. "Pat for short—"

Old Dunk seemed surprised. "Powder Valley, eh?" It was plain the name meant something to him. "You're a smooth hombre, Stevens. Expect maybe you know Kyle?"

"No, Pomerene, I don't. But nobody wins a brawl. I was only interested in preventing unnecessary trouble."

Sheriff Crotty had moved up behind Pomerene, his long face impassive. "Yuh done right, Stevens," he murmured. "Few more men like you, and there'd be less disagreeable work for men like me."

Pat scrutinized him curiously. Crotty did not bear the stamp of a weak sister, and the fact carried its own weight in Stevens' mind. "Never did much like taking sides, myself," he observed without batting a lash. "Have a drink—"

A round was set up amidst small talk of the range. As Pomerene seldom removed his glance from Pat's face, it soon became apparent that there was something on his mind besides making himself agreeable.

"Driftin' through, Stevens?" he inquired.

Pat briefly outlined the circumstances of the Bar ES drive. "Our wagon's out on the creek now. We'll be drifting along tomorrow," he added.

Pomerene weighed this, dallying with his glass. "Any-

thing urgent callin' you back to Powder Valley?" he queried suddenly.

Pat paused. He shook his head slowly. "Nothing beyond the usual ranch affairs—not that I expect to delay anyway."

Old Dunk cleared his throat. "I was wonderin'—" He broke off, and his eye came up, sharp and piercing now. "Maybe you'd consider a job with me."

Pat's smile was gently incredulous. "Thanks," he said dryly. "My friends say I spend my time ducking work, Pomerene."

"Not punchin' cows. I want to hire a range detective, Stevens—a good one. From all I've heard, you'd fill the bill."

Pat turned this over, listening politely.

"Rustling?" he asked at length.

"Well, some goes on, o' course. But mostly it's just general orneriness." Pomerene's deliberate speech seemed feeling its way. "Don't get me wrong, my boy. There's no open range war here, but the men've grown edgy. A puncher or two's been shot without plain reason. I don't like the feel of things —an' I've got a mighty big investment to consider. I'll pay high for a man who'll clear up this condition."

Pat's thought roamed far afield as the rancher talked. Was there an edging of hidden fear behind Pomerene's somewhat evasive description of affairs? His remarks did not appear to be directed at the sheriff, whose business such matters would normally be.

"Some threats've been aimed at me," Dunk went on. "Yuh heard Kyle's talk. I don't take stock in that. As the biggest outfit in the hills, I consider it inevitable. But it don't end there. Nobody rests easy on this range. Somethin's buildin' up underneath. I'll have the thanks of all if I can help to bust it wide-open."

An uncomfortable silence fell as he came to an end, for Pat appeared to have nothing to offer. But Pomerene was not done. "What about it, Stevens?" he prodded gruffly. "Yuh interested?"

Pat's headshake was barely perceptible. "I'm obliged for

the offer, Pomerene. Afraid it wouldn't be in my line. But your idea is good. You'll find a man—a better one, probably."

The rancher's heavy face fell. "Yuh won't consider it—at any price?" Obviously he had set great store by this plan which had come to him suddenly.

"As I look at it right now—no," Pat returned. The answer was civil, and definite.

The afternoon shadows were long when he and Sam stepped into the street a few minutes later. In the act of mounting his horse, Pat paused to glance at a girl striding across the street. Neat in a severe white shirtwaist, she wore fringed buckskin gauntlets and a fringed, split riding skirt of the same material. Her trim boots were beaded. Deep golden eyes, under the wide, black flat-brim hat were keen with concern.

Every man in this town was sharply aware of her, and even Pat did not miss anything.

"What do I care for a dozen Lafe Kyles?" she flung curtly over her shoulder at a young fellow who had accosted her. "Where's Father? I want to see him."

A man standing by the hitch rail thumbed toward the bar. With a crisp nod of thanks, the girl swirled by Pat and Sam, where they sat their saddles in silence, without appearing to see them. Pat took note of the sturdy small shoulders and the thick coils of brown hair as she headed for the door of the Only Chance. He caught Sam's wink as they twitched loose their reins and turned away.

"She's plumb worried about her daddy," the little man muttered. "Danged if she ain't—an' plenty!"

Glancing back as they moved off, Pat watched the girl standing stubbornly at the swing doors until joined, a moment later, by the dark-faced rancher and Sheriff Crotty. Her relief upon finding her parent unharmed was obvious even at a distance.

"Pomerene's daughter," Pat murmured. "Not many girls would've dared what she just did and not a man in this town will think less of her for it."

It seemed a measure of her personality; and as Pat rode, he went on idly thinking about her. Was she the reason for the secret dread that ate, he had guessed, at the powerful Crow Track owner like a hidden canker? He did not know enough yet to be sure.

2.

A MILE OUT of Lost Trail, a faintly marked trace came down from the hills to join the road. It was a ranch trail. There was open range up there somewhere, and as Sam looked that way a rickety wagon, drawn by a discouraged-looking old horse, came over the last rise and rattled down the slope through the thinning pines.

Pat slowed his pace so that they reached the forks together, and his eyes were busy. A work-worn woman, a young girl, and a small boy rode on the wagon, which was piled high with every variety of article from battered chairs to the dented tin washtub hanging over the back. Padded and partly covered with tattered blankets, that load looked like the entire worldly possessions of a poor family. The woman and her companions scrutinized the two horsemen, a little fearfully.

"Howdy, Mrs. Kyle." Pat touched his hat.

She started with surprise, hauling the horse in. "How-do. You know my name, I see. Perhaps a friend of Lafe's—"

"Why, I do know him. . . . Going somewhere?" Pat was ingenuously casual.

"We're leavin' the country," she exclaimed, stiffening again, as if expecting defiance. "Don't try to stop us!"

Pat's brows hoisted. "Like that?" His sympathy was quick, and in no time at all he succeeded in getting Mrs. Kyle's story. According to her bleak explanation, Crow Track was

steadily driving the smaller spreads off the range. The abandonment of Kyle's Rocking K was only the latest of a series of similar events. She did not accuse Dunk Pomerene openly, but the stark facts spoke for themselves.

Pat looked the girl over. Perhaps eighteen, black-haired and vivid, she seemed more indignant than defeated. The boy didn't know what it was all about; he was only scared.

"We've got to get on," exclaimed the woman.

"Maybe it ain't that bad," Pat suggested. "No use being too hasty—"

"No—it was Lafe's strict orders to move out today," Mrs. Kyle declared. "He's fed up, and we're leavin'. Said he had a last errand in town, and not to wait. But he should be along any time now." She gazed anxiously up the road in the direction of Lost Trail.

Pat silently told himself that he knew what that last errand of Kyle's had been—to square with Pomerene, by violence if possible, and then run.

"Lafe might change his mind," he reminded her with unbroken gravity. "I think I'd wait if I was you. Unless you're real anxious to get away?"

"Lord knows I've moved enough times," she sighed, with pathetic courage. "Things never get any better, no matter where we go."

He nodded to some thought of his own. "I'll talk to Lafe if I see him. Seems he's got little to lose, from what you say. No need to hurry matters."

She looked at him with trembling lips. Clearly encouragement did not often come her way. "Thank you. You're kind, I'm sure." Still she delayed, worry knotting her patient face. She didn't know what to do, but at length she cramped the wagon about once more. Pat and Sam watched it crawl creaking back up the slope toward the Rocking K. Sloan was the first to speak.

"You'll talk to Kyle, huh? . . . Sounds like you're figgerin' to be around—"

"Not at all. Lafe Kyle was mighty jittery, Sam. If his

missus would put a mite more backbone into him, he might tough it out where he is."

"Then yuh don't think he's a flop here?"

"You heard Mrs. Kyle. With a dozen cows left, he'll be no better off wherever he goes."

Sam shrugged. Kyle might not be a fool; but if bad luck continued to dog him, as it did some men, he would never be any better off. Sam did not feel called upon to concern himself further.

A cool breeze swept the shallow valley they reached ten minutes later, following the course of Wolf Creek, tumbling smoothly down out of the hills to the north. Ezra had pitched camp near a grove of willows. The lanky one scowled as they rode up to dismount. "Be here soon as me, huh?" he threw at them caustically. "Dang liars!"

"You're faster'n we thought, is all." Sam brushed aside the complaint. He turned and went on talking ostentatiously to Pat about a horse they apparently had been discussing.

Snorting his disgust, Ezra turned back to the fire, where sizzling pots and kettles stood amid the hot ashes. Supper was ready. After the luxury of a wash in the creek, they sat down to eat.

Dusk was thickening in the pines by the time they finished. Ezra dumped the last of the coffee grounds onto the fire and abruptly rose. "I s'pose mebby I can git to town for an hour—now that you've had yore whirl?"

Sam was ready with a cutting jibe, but Pat forestalled him, speaking quietly. "Go ahead, Ez."

The one-eyed man stumped to his horse, swung aboard, and singlefooted away toward Lost Trail. The sound of his going had scarcely sunk into the thick evening hush when Pat spied a young fellow splashing across the creek on a jaded bronc. He drew rein near the fire, murmured "Howdy," and sat waiting.

"Get down, boy! Get down," Pat said, his quick eye noting that the other was riding bareback, a folded and roped blanket taking the place of a saddle. Grubliner, Pat's swift glance docketed the newcomer; and he shoved the kettles

back on the fire to warm. "Just in time to eat—if you can wait for some fresh coffee."

"Nice of yuh." The young cowboy's soft-spoken friendliness did not cover the sharpness with which he scrutinized everything, taking particular note of Pat and his companion and following their smallest movement. "The handle's Marlin," he murmured. "Dale Marlin."

Pat and Sam introduced themselves. Perhaps because they did not seem curious, Marlin was soon talking freely. The two friends learned that here was another victim of Crow Track, if the puncher's talk was straight. Marlin had ridden a couple of years for V Slash, until the small brand had been rustled out. His employer had given up the fight six months ago.

"Out of work all this time?" grunted Sam, in mock surprise.

Marlin was flustered. He made no reference to his lack of a saddle—perhaps did not need to. "I been away," he explained hastily. "But this range is home to me, somehow. I don't know what it is—"

"We've heard talk of trouble here, Marlin," Pat put in bluntly. "Would you know what's behind it?"

"Crow Track," Marlin responded immediately, his tone gone harsh. "You'd know too, if yuh ran into Polk Buckner—"

"Who's Buckner?"

"Pomerene's right bower—Crow Track foreman. Damn him!" Marlin breathed hard for a moment before he got hold of himself.

"Hard hombre, eh?" Sam queried.

For five minutes they listened to raw tales of Polk Buckner's roughshod tactics, all unerringly directed toward the aggrandizement of Crow Track. According to Marlin, cowboys had been beaten senseless—and at least one killed—by Buckner's order; and it was Marlin's conviction that Polk was behind no little of the rustling as well.

"You mean this is all Pomerene's work, really?" Pat threw in the question, curtly.

Marlin hesitated. "I know Dunk's tryin' to gobble this

range, Stevens, if that's what yuh mean. Dang shame too, with all he's got. At least, I'm sorry for Fern—"

"Who's she?"

"Dunk's daughter."

Pat looked at him quickly. Marlin had been about to use the word *girl*. His substitution of the politer designation seemed significant.

"Nice kid, I expect?" Pat remarked.

But the puncher was not to be drawn out on this subject. "Shore," he said coolly, and shut up. Pat's curious glance remained on his face. He was of no mind to let up on the other now.

"Fern Pomerene," he pursued musingly. "She's a long ways above you, Marlin—"

"Don't I know it!" Marlin exclaimed harshly, and his face went dusky red. "But there's no need bringin' that up, Stevens."

Pat was satisfied that he had succeeded in penetrating this young fellow's secret. No wonder Marlin found something about the Lost Trail country that made it his home range! But the outlook for any such hopes as his seemed dark. Pat doubted if it could spell anything but trouble.

An hour after dark, Ezra had not yet returned. More than once Pat glanced down the trail toward town, listening without being entirely aware of it. At last he got up.

"You might as well lay over with us, Marlin," he said. "We've extra blankets. Meanwhile, reckon I'd better hunt up Ez. He's got no sense of time—"

"Yuh mean he's got no sense," corrected Sam sourly.

"What's the difference?" Pat grinned and added, "I mean, between you and him!"

He ducked the pot Sloan hurled at him and dragged his saddle toward the picketed horses. Marlin said nothing at all, watching until Pat swung a leg over his bronc and jogged away.

It was a dark night, too dark to see ten feet, but the horse did not hesitate. Twenty minutes later Pat glimpsed a light, and then another. It was Lost Trail.

Pat dismounted before the bar and strolled in. A few men were talking desultorily over drinks. In a back corner, under a bracket lamp, a card game was in progress. Pat saw Ezra lay down his cards to fumble through his pockets.

"Ez," he called quietly. "If you can break away—it's getting late."

Ezra only waved him away. But a few minutes later the big fellow joined Pat at the bar, grumbling under his breath. "Got some of our hoss money on yuh?" he demanded abruptly.

Pat eyed him sharply, shoving a drink forward. "They stripped you, eh?"

"Never mind that!" Ezra revealed irritation. "Yuh givin' me my money, or ain't yuh? I want it—"

The fat sum received for the Bar ES horses in Durango, half of which belonged technically to Ezra, had been placed in Pat's custody for safekeeping. The one-eyed man stared incredulously now as Stevens shook a brief negative.

"Haven't got it on me, Ez—"

"Go git it, then."

It was said so peremptorily that Pat paused, his face gone stern. "Hold on now. You don't mean that." His voice was dead-level, colorless. "A little game is all right—if you lost, okay. But you don't aim to throw big money around, I hope?"

"It's my money," Ezra insisted.

His very stubbornness indicated a weakening will, but Pat found it no easy matter to argue him out of getting back into the poker game. He succeeded at last, and they turned toward the door.

"It's late and we need our rest," Pat reasoned as they mounted before the saloon. "We're moving out early in the morning."

Left alone in camp with young Marlin, Sam Sloan found nothing better to occupy his time than making a casual study of the puncher. Marlin was a likable chap, quiet-spoken and far from a whiner despite his hardships; but Sam was not long in detecting a certain uneasiness in his manner which

only grew with passing time. Sitting back from the fire, Marlin was alert to every night sound.

An owl hoot from the ridge brought his head swiveling around to attention. He ignored a casual question from Sam as if he failed altogether to hear it. Yet his air of listening was almost painful in its intensity.

"Somethin's ridin' his hump," the little man reflected—and he recalled the strung tenseness of Lost Trail while he and Pat were there. Something *was* wrong on this range, as Dunk Pomerene had claimed; some malign undercurrent to which Marlin reacted much like the others. There was nothing mysterious about it to Sam. It was the rank smell of promised violence.

On his arrival, Marlin had left his tired horse ground-tethered a few short yards away. Since eating he had made no move to unsaddle and stake the animal out. Sam was finally moved to speak of it.

"Yuh aimin' to do somethin' for that bronc, Marlin?" he queried. "From his ganted look, he'd relish a good roll an' a mouthful of grass right well—"

Marlin was only half-attentive. "I'll tend to it," he said carelessly.

But he made no move to do so. A few minutes later he got up hastily and moved back from the fire. Glancing up, Sam presently caught the muffled clip-clop of hoofs advancing along the road. He made no move himself as two horsemen rode past in the direction of town, deliberately refusing to acknowledge his soft hail of greeting. Marlin waited till the sound of those horses had died out completely, before slowly returning.

"You're mighty edgy, boy," Sam told him flatly. "If you're worried about Stevens ridin' into town, forget it. He ain't the talkin' kind—"

"I got troubles, Sloan—but that ain't botherin' me," Marlin denied, almost too promptly.

Sam waited for more, which did not come. "Ain't trustin' nobody, are yuh?" he grunted under his breath.

That this judgment was slightly exaggerated Marlin dem-

onstrated presently by readily accepting a smoke—and—standing, while rolling and lighting it, in such a position that Sam could easily have disarmed him had he so desired. At a sudden commotion a rod or two away along the creek bank, Marlin tossed aside the blazing twig he had used for a match. Sam too was startled. A great thumping and thrashing sounded among the bushes.

"It's one of yore broncs," Marlin jerked out tightly. "Reckon he's got tangled up in them willows—"

"Naw. It's that dang mule!"

Sam ran that way, and it was five minutes before he got the mule straightened out and cropping grass once more in the open. On his return to the fire, it was to find no trace of the young puncher.

"Marlin—" Sam called guardedly.

There was no response. Sam walked toward the spot where Marlin's horse had been standing. It was gone. Marlin had pulled out.

Sam walked to the fire, scratching his head thoughtfully, his hat cocked at a comical angle. He righted it with a cuff, absently gazing off into the darkness.

He had not long to wait for an answer to the riddle. Ten minutes later he caught the rapid thud of approaching horses. He moved back a few feet out of the light, stubbornly refusing to desert the fire altogether. Three hard-faced men jogged up and reined down, confronting him across the blaze.

"Who're you?" one of them spoke up roughly.

"A man mindin' my own business," was Sam's terse response.

Silence fell, the three scrutinizing him as sharply as possible in the dim light. They had no trouble making him out for a stranger. "Rider drift by here a while ago—young feller?" one of them demanded.

"He might of."

"Come on—did he, or didn't he?" The query cracked like a pistol shot.

"Don't know nothin', an' I ain't sayin'."

"Oh, hell," another of the trio snarled. "Marlin's prob'ly miles away now, an' makin' tracks. Ain't nothin' to be got out of this old coot."

One of the riders hesitated. "I ain't so shore—" They gazed long at Sam, their rocky faces bleak. A desire to work him over lay naked in their eyes.

Finally one of them dismounted, to move about the camp warily, peering into the shadows. He found the camp wagon and poked around in it briefly, while the others kept unwavering watch of Sam.

The third man came back. "He ain't here."

Sloan waited, silent. His readiness appeared to communicate itself to them, for they made no openly hostile move. One reined away toward the trail, and the others slowly followed. A curse drifted back.

Long after they had ridden beyond earshot, Sam waited for some possible surprise move. He was still on the alert when Pat and Ezra rode up on their way from town. He looked his long-legged partner up and down in silence and then turned pointedly to Pat.

"Ten bucks says I know where yuh found him—"

Pat smothered a smile. "Where's that?"

"Why, yuh had to drag him out of a card game, o' course," Sam returned, with condescending assurance.

Pat paid no attention to the wordy altercation which promptly ensued. Nor did he evince any surprise on finding Sam apparently alone.

"In the morning, before Marlin leaves," he cut in on the argument, "be sure he gets that old battered saddle of mine in the wagon—he can put it to better use than I ever will."

Turning, Sam forgot all about his tiff with Ezra. "Too late," he tossed back laconically. "Marlin's already pulled his freight—an' took the hull with him."

Pat's brows swiftly darkened. "That kind, eh? Why, dang him—"

"Hold on," Sam put in quickly. "Lemme tell it all."

He described the puncher's growing restlessness and told

how it had finally driven Marlin out. Pat listened in silence to his account of the arrival of Marlin's pursuers, and their frustration.

"Not a posse, was it?"

Sam shrugged. "I spotted one hoss brand—seemed like the feller showed it to me deliberate. It was Crow Track."

Pat pondered that. While Ez questioned Sloan further, he moved toward the camp wagon, a question in his own mind. For some minutes he tumbled things about. Nothing appeared to be gone except the worn saddle he had intended giving Marlin. But Pat was not satisfied. He located his bedroll, and with one hand burrowed deep among the folds. The object for which he sought eluded him. He probed deeper, only to lean back at last, harsh lines showing about his firm-set mouth.

The fat leather purse into which he had stuffed the Bar ES horse money, entrusted to his keeping by Ezra and Sam, had disappeared. The money was gone.

3.

Pat Stevens' first reaction, as he sat there on the wagon's edge, was one of cold anger. He returned slowly to the fire. The others noted his sobriety, but no word left his lips concerning the stolen money. In the first surprise of his discovery, Pat did not know what to think, but he had no intention of allowing the matter to drop.

"What's eatin' you?" Ezra demanded.

Pat deliberately kicked a smoking ember, and spoke abruptly. "I've changed my mind. I'm taking that job with Pomerene."

Sam stared at him, his blue-stubbled jowls curiously rigid.

"I seen it comin'," he burst out, dismay in his tone. "But hell, Stevens. You're hirin' out on the wrong side!"

"How do you know that?"

"Why, everything we've seen or heard so far shrieks of it!"

Pat was not to be moved. "I'll grant that Pomerene is a successful man, rich and powerful. What of it? I've got hopes of standing in his position someday, myself. If you mean he's got enemies, I won't hold that against him till I know more than I do now."

Sam forced a groan. "If that ain't jest like yuh—plumb askin' for trouble!"

"Don't git flustered, runt," Ezra put in gruffly. "There's nothin' to it . . . You drive the wagon home to Powder Valley, an' *I'll* wait around for Pat. That suit yuh?"

Sloan glared at him. "Scentin' powder smoke too, are yuh? If it's like that, we'll all stay!" He turned to Pat. "I suppose you'll ride in early in the mornin', to reach Pomerene before he leaves town—"

"I'll do better than that," Pat said promptly. "I'm riding into Lost Trail right now."

If they thought him a little precipitate, neither bothered to argue further. Sam dragged his hull out of the wagon and started to saddle up with Stevens. Seeing the move, Ezra was inclined to follow suit. Pat stopped him.

"Somebody'll have to stay in camp, Ez. Might as well get your rest. We ought to be back in an hour."

The one-eyed man gave in grumpily. Pat and Sam pulled out a few minutes later, pushing their horses briskly.

The few remaining lights of Lost Trail gleamed golden as they entered the wide dusty street. Despite the lateness of the hour, Pat was surprised to find men still moving about. Sam nudged him with an arm as they were racking their horses, indicating a man who loitered in the door of the Only Chance.

"That's one of the hombres that was huntin' Marlin," the little man murmured. "—An' there's another of 'em," he added the next moment.

Pat watched the second man, who was crossing the street diagonally. Faint light glinted from the gun swinging at his hip, and his manner seemed tense.

"Looks like they're expectin' action right now—"

Pat shrugged, turning toward the saloon. The man standing in the batwing doors drifted away, melting into the shadows outside. About to enter the place, Pat paused to let another man out and then glanced at him sharply. It was Sheriff Crotty.

"I was looking for you, Crotty—"

"Not gone yet, Stevens?" The lawman halted, wiping his mustached mouth with a bony hand. He nodded to Sam.

"I've decided to take Pomerene's offer," Pat informed him. "Thought I'd let you know."

Crotty looked at him slowly and nodded again. It was impossible to tell whether the announcement conveyed anything to him or not. "You'll find Dunk over at Mrs. Crale's." He indicated a rambling two-story structure across the street, which Pat took for a boardinghouse. "There's Buckner over there now—Pomerene's foreman," Crotty continued.

A blocky, square-faced man stood on the boardinghouse porch, from where he could survey every part of the street; but beyond the fact that he appeared a formidable figure, Pat could tell little about him.

"Looks like he was standing guard," he commented.

Crotty's stolid mind skirted that remark, and withdrew. His heavy eyes were veiled. He did not reply.

"Crotty, what do you know about a young fellow named Dale Marlin?" Pat pursued matter-of-factly.

"Marlin? V Slash puncher till Vernon folded. He didn't work for a while. Ain't seen him lately—"

"Looking for him?"

"Me?" Crotty appeared surprised. "No, Stevens—I ain't."

"No charges standing against him?" Pat persisted.

"Not in my bailiwick." The sheriff was growing puzzled by this line of questioning. "Any reason for askin', Stevens?"

"This range is new to me," Pat reminded him, avoiding a

direct answer. "I'll probably be curious about a lot of things."

They talked a few minutes longer. If Crotty did not seem over cordial, neither did he display antagonism. Pat asked for no more.

"Well—good luck," the other man said finally, turning to leave. "I'll be watchin' yore work, Stevens."

Sam watched him disappear in the darkness, the sound of his boots dying out. "What'd he mean by that crack?" he queried suspiciously.

Glancing over the street, Pat shrugged it off. Polk Buckner, he noted, was still posted sentinel-like on the boardinghouse porch. Standing motionless, Pat applied himself to the problem of that man.

"Yuh bracin' him?" Sam asked in a low tone.

Pat's headshake was minute. He was still thinking. "Roll yourself a smoke," he muttered presently, "and stick around." He started down the steps.

Well aware that his every movement was noted, he led his bronc across to the dark livery stable opposite. No lights burned here, and no one met him as he entered. Pausing inside, he was greeted by the sound of a muffled snore from the direction of the stalls. A smile touched his lips. He haltered his horse to a scarred upright and then moved on through to the back of the barn. A moment later the stars gleamed overhead.

It was pitch dark out here. Picking his way with care through the litter of backyards, Pat found himself at length behind the boardinghouse. A lamp, turned low, burned in the silent kitchen. He passed up a door giving upon the ground floor and soon discovered a flight of outside stairs along the side wall. Bounding lightly up, he found himself on a narrow porch.

The door above appeared to open on a back hallway and was closed by a flimsy screen. A light jerk released the loose inside hook, and he was inside.

Mrs. Crale's establishment was sprawling and intricate. Wings, which had been added on at the back, explained this

winding and turning hall. Pat strove to penetrate the gloom, wondering where Dunk Pomerene was to be found.

"He won't be stuck away in these back halls," he reflected. "Likely him and his girl have got the best rooms, out front."

His shoulder softly thudded against a corner as the dark hall angled, and he turned with it, making no attempt at stealth. Sounds of sleep came softly from an occasional door. One stood slightly open for air, with a light burning inside. An ancient beam cracked somewhere behind him, and he paused.

Next moment, he melted into the shadows against the wall. Was that the faint sound of furtive movement that came to his straining ears? After a long waiting pause, he eased to the near corner and stole a guarded look.

This was a straight corridor running through to the front of the building. There was light here. A lamp stood on the newel post overlooking the stairwell, its beams outlining the worn hall carpet, a chair, and a small table shoved against the wall.

Pat was studying the line of closed doors when a shadow on one of them caught his eye. His gaze fixed. The door was slowly, stealthily opening. A second later a man stepped into the hall. He moved silently and stealthily, and there was a gun in his upraised hand.

One look at that drawn, bold-featured face, and Pat's breath caught. He recognized Lafe Kyle. It took no more than an instant to divine the reason for Kyle's presence here. Foiled in his first attempt, he still determinedly sought Dunk Pomerene with death in his heart.

Evidently Kyle had gained access to one of the vacant bedrooms, perhaps from an adjacent roof. And just as plainly he had a definite idea of where Pomerene's room was, for he turned down the hall without hesitation.

Nor did Pat delay. Kyle's back was toward him as he stole forward with long, soundless steps. At the last minute Lafe sensed or heard something, for he started to turn. But too late. Pat's arms, encircling him swiftly, pinned both his own helplessly to his sides.

There was a brief, sharp struggle. When Kyle found himself pinioned by a man stronger than himself, he gave over abruptly, craning his head around to see who it was. There was a wild, almost animal balefulness in the eyes that stared into Pat's. The rancher's jutting jaw dropped then.

"You ag'in?" he gasped.

Still he did not know what to expect, breathing hard. Plainly he looked forward to no lenience, caught in this damning position at such an hour.

"Get hold of yourself, Kyle," Pat rasped under his breath. With a deft movement he wrested the other's gun out of his grasp.

Released, Kyle half-staggered away, only to whirl around. His stubbly visage was livid.

"Damn yuh, this is the second time—" he began hotly.

"Keep your voice down." Pat overrode him with hard authority. "I don't need to warn you that Polk Buckner is down at the bottom of those stairs."

Lafe measured that, still panting softly. He watched Pat's every move with wary eyes.

"This grudge of yours is all damned foolishness, Kyle! Why stick your head into a powder keg? Whatever you think of Pomerene, his death won't solve a thing."

Kyle's stubborn eyes sought the floor. "It's an eye for an eye, with me," he jerked out fiercely. "Pomerene busted me, an' he'll pay—"

"And what about your family?" Pat pinned him down, shortly. "Plug Pomerene, and you can't expect to get out of this town alive. I talked to your wife, Kyle—sent her back to the Rocking K. I promised her you'd get back safe. Or don't you care what becomes of her?"

Kyle was struggling with himself, his face dark.

"But I'm smashed, Stevens! What can I do?" he burst out desperately.

"Nonsense. You won't starve. I'm staying here," Pat told him grimly. "I'll iron things out. Go back to your ranch." Gauging Kyle shrewdly and judging him sufficiently cowed, he handed the other's gun back.

The weapon once more in his clawlike hand, Lafe stood wrestling with his caustic hatred. "No, sir! By Gawd, I ain't takin' it." Suddenly his voice rose uncontrollably. "What's your license to talk this way to me?"

Almost before Pat could move, Kyle sprang forward, striving to break past. Bleak of face, Pat hurled him violently back.

Lafe landed on one knee, then leaped erect. His face was aflame. "Out of my way," he gritted, "before I blast yuh!"

He was unprepared for the iron grip which fastened on him then. Making a wild attempt to tear free, he lunged against Pat. The latter's darting hand caught the wrist just as the heavy six-gun was about to smash down on his head.

They wrestled sharply until, setting himself, Pat gave a tremendous thrust. Kyle stumbled backward to sprawl at the head of the stairs. Before he could gather his wits, a shoving kick tumbled him end over end down the short flight to the first landing. There, Pat's hand fastened itself in his collar and jerked him up.

"You don't understand when you're well off, Kyle," Pat rapped out. "Now you'll leave if I have to throw you the rest of the way!"

The bang and thud of their struggle had been heard below. Boots clattered in the downstairs hall, and Polk Buckner started up the stairs on the run. Seeing Pat hauling Kyle downward with rough determination, the Crow Track foreman retreated to the bottom and waited.

Still writhing and cursing, Lafe seemed scarcely to comprehend what was happening to him. Pat ran him down the last few steps and released him so violently that Kyle went down with a crash and his gun bounced away. He staggered up just as two Crow Track punchers made for him from the open door.

"Toss that fool out in the street." Pat's authoritative tone rang in the place.

The Crow Track hands never paused to question his order, but hustled Lafe outside and hurled him to the dust.

It was Buckner who strode after, an air of alert command on his weathered face.

"Cut that out!" he roared as a gun crashed out there. And then: "Kyle!"

"Wal?" came sullenly out of the dusky shadows, after an insulting pause.

"Get on your bronc and go home. *You hear me?*" Buckner rifled.

"I know . . . Yore men'll be watchin'," Kyle's mutter came, despondently. He stumbled away.

Polk Buckner turned to confront Pat, just inside the door. There was bristling menace in his manner. Nor did his tone concede anything. "Just who're you?"

Examining this man narrowly, Pat understood why Polk Buckner was both hated and feared as the foreman of Crow Track. He was tall and square-built and must be crowding forty. Bluff and hard, he appeared not to know what manners were—perhaps had never needed to know. His agate-gray gaze said that he kept a tight curb on all men, including himself.

"I'm working for Pomerene," Pat said in a tone whose coolness matched the other man's.

Buckner's eyes bored into him. "I'll believe that when Dunk tells me," he growled.

"Fair enough. I want him to."

Pat turned toward the stairs just as a stout woman of militant aspect came thumping down. She was homely, and there was fire in her eye; nor did her curl papers or the wrinkled wrapper in which she had bundled herself tend to improve her appearance.

"See here! Who's makin' an ungodly uproar in my house at this hour?" she hurled at the men impartially.

Pat met her with engaging candor. "No damage done, Mrs. Crale. You can thank Buckner, here, for it," he said smoothly.

Taken by surprise at this announcement, Polk remained obdurately silent. She eyed them both severely, and her gaze fastened on the foreman.

"His boys were forced to toss out a troublemaker," Pat continued, before the latter could speak.

Mrs. Crale glanced toward the door. The Crow Track men, abashed by her formidable presence, had retreated to the darkness outside. Still she remained dubious. "Troublemaker? . . . Who?" she snapped.

"It was Lafe Kyle. Reckon he was drunk, and aimin' to pester old Dunk—"

"Him!" she sniffed scornfully. "I warned him never to show his face in my place."

"We'll just step up and tell Pomerene it's all right," Pat went on easily, moving past her toward the stairs. "He must've heard the racket, and he'll wonder."

Mrs. Crale's opinion of men in general appeared anything but high, but she let them go. Climbing the steps, Polk Buckner gave Pat a long steady look. Obviously not displeased at receiving the credit for what had taken place, he still was not fooled for a minute. Pat made a note of his cagy way. Buckner would prove a tough nut to crack.

4.

A GIRL AWAITED them at the head of the stairs, peering down with concern.

"What's the trouble, Polk?" she asked.

Pat experienced a pleasant shock of recognition on meeting those deep golden eyes, which were quick to observe his action in removing his hat, although Buckner failed to follow the example. Fern Pomerene's trim dressing gown presented a striking contrast to Mrs. Crale's dowdy wrapper, only adding to the girl's charm. Her hair tumbled down her back in a brown cascade.

"No trouble," Buckner thrust aside her query with brusque familiarity. "Wanta see Dunk a minute—"

The girl took his rough manner as a matter of course, her glance lingering on Pat with frank curiosity as she moved aside.

Pomerene stood at the open door of his room. A tired man in shirt sleeves, his suspenders hanging down, he showed his advanced age in thinning gray hair, fiery complexion, and silvery stubbled jaws.

"Well. What is it now?" he growled as the two men advanced.

Buckner simply indicated Pat Stevens with a thumb, a questioning look on his stolid features.

"We shouldn't be bothering you at this hour," Pat told the rancher quietly. "But one thing led to another. Pomerene, you offered me a job. I'll take you up on it now."

If old Dunk's hooded eyes were asking the reason for this sudden shift, he did not hesitate. "Fine, Stevens. I was hopin' you'd change your mind." He shook hands with something akin to relief. "You're on Crow Track's payroll startin' from noon today."

Pat was uncomfortably surprised. "I sure wasn't hurrying on that account—" he protested.

"No matter." Pomerene was suavely firm. "You bestirred yourself in my interests this afternoon. You were on your own, Stevens—but I don't forget."

In the pause which followed, Polk Buckner's breathing was distinctly audible. Turning to his foreman, Pomerene tersely explained the offer he had made Stevens and instructed him to extend whatever aid or information Pat needed. Pomerene was continuing matter-of-factly, when Buckner's dour expression caused him to break off short.

"What's the matter?" he demanded curtly.

"Nothin', I reckon—except that you're advertisin' for trouble, hirin' a range bull," the foreman drawled.

"How so?"

"Simple enough. It'll bring every little rancher in the Yellowhammers down on us. An' you know it!"

Buckner's tone had grown domineering and intolerant, his scorn thinly disguised. Pat glanced toward the girl, standing at one side. She was watching Buckner steadily, taking it all in.

"Aren't we fighting off rather more than half of them now, Polk?" she asked softly.

"Shore," her father concurred bluntly. "Somebody's got to do somethin'. I'm gettin' old, an' I want peace. I won't crawl for it."

Buckner shrugged. "You're the boss." Staring stubbornly at the floor, he refused to meet his employer's eye. "No need of my sayin' I've nothin' against Stevens. I never saw him before. I'm only thinkin' about the effect of hirin' him."

Despite all he could say, it was plain enough to Pat, at least, that the foreman believed Pomerene to be taking the management of Crow Track out of his hands. Dunk must have got it too. His bushy brows lowered. "Are you warnin' me, Polk?"

Buckner spread his broad hands with a show of repudiation. "Hell, Dunk! Since when've I got tough with you?" he protested. "I thought yuh was askin' my opinion—"

"I'll always listen to that—an' then form my own. Stevens is workin' for Crow Track, an' that's that," Pomerene decisively closed the matter.

"I expect Buckner and I'll work together without any hitch," Pat put in calmly. "I'll be depending considerably on his judgment myself, before I get through."

There was a double suggestion here that would have poured oil on waters more troubled than these. The ruffled foreman gave Pat an impassive look; but his failure even to attempt any response in kind, all too clearly informed Pat that he and Polk Buckner were not destined to be friends.

After arranging a meeting for the morrow, the two men left, allowing the rancher and his daughter to retire. Reaching the street, Buckner pointedly ignored Pat and rejoined his men.

Sam Sloan was still sitting on the saloon steps. "Yuh run into that Kyle again over there?" he grunted.

Pat's nod was light. "Lafe's easier to handle than Buckner is liable to be. Wait till I get my bronc, Sam, and we'll hit for camp."

That was the extent of his comment on the night's adventure. They found Ezra asleep on their arrival at Wolf Creek and were not long in rolling into their own blankets. Night air had cooled the parched hills, and Sam's sleep was so sound that it seemed only a matter of minutes before he opened his eyes on the spreading dawn.

"Wal, so you're takin' another job, Stevens," Ezra grumbled as they ate a leisurely breakfast. "It's mean, dangerous, an' tough—so yuh couldn't pass it up. What'll me an' Sam be doin'?" he demanded abruptly.

Pat's grin was serene. "If you insist on waiting, you might's well pick up expenses. It's dollars to dirt nobody but Crow Track is hiring around here—but keep your shirt on. I'll arrange it."

"Seein' Pomerene today, are yuh?"

Pat assented. "Load up the wagon. We'll go in town together."

It was drawing on toward nine o'clock when Sam hitched the mule at a rack at the upper end of Lost Trail. Pat and Ezra waited while he climbed down from the wagon, and all three turned into the Only Chance. It was too early for drinks, but they found Dunk Pomerene sitting alone at one of the tables, a cheroot in his fingers. He waved them to adjacent chairs.

Seating himself, Pat evinced mild surprise at not finding Polk Buckner present. "He'll likely be along. You want we should wait for him?" he asked the cattleman.

Pomerene's smile was dry. "No doubt Polk would be interested in this talk, Stevens. But he left word he was called away early this mornin'."

Pat nodded. "No use waiting then. I've got to know where I stand." He sat forward. "First, Pomerene—are you figuring to grab this range?"

Old Dunk had put on his dignity again this morning. His

white brows twitched humorously. "Well, this mountain graze is thin. A man never has quite enough," he admitted frankly. "I've been takin' up all leases offered—but no rough stuff, o' course." He paused. "Is that what you meant? You've got a free hand, Stevens—don't worry about steppin' on my toes."

Pat signified his comprehension. "About this rustling. Does it matter whose stock is lifted?"

Pomerene's traplike mouth grew stern in spite of himself. "If it's Crow Track stuff, it matters plenty! But if a rustler will steal from one brand, he'll steal from another. If yore chance comes, get him—an' get him good! But this goes beyond rustlin', as I told yuh before. I said yuh'd have a free hand, Stevens, and I mean it. I want yuh to learn what's eatin' the heart out of this country, an' stamp it out."

There could be no doubting the force of his sincerity. After a little more talk, Pat professed himself satisfied. He put a few questions concerning range conditions which Pomerene was peculiarly fitted to answer, and then rose.

"By the way, my friends here will want something to do. What do you suggest?"

Dunk had already taken shrewd measurement of Sam and Ezra. What he had seen must have satisfied him. "If line-ridin' 'll do, they can strike Buckner any time. He's hirin'."

Pat and the two partners expressed their thanks and presently left the saloon. Once outside they parted; but it was scarcely half an hour before Sam sought out Pat once more, where he was chewing the fat with a garrulous livery-stable attendant.

"Well, we got our jobs," the little man announced.

Pat regarded him quizzically. "Found Buckner, eh?"

"Shore. Hired us right off the reel. Told us to—" Sam stopped. "Say! Pomerene told us Buckner left word he was called away, didn't he?"

"Likely he got back quick," Pat said dryly. But he needed no more to assure him that the foreman had deliberately ignored the conference in the saloon. It seemed notice in full of what to expect henceforth.

Ezra and Sam had been directed to report sometime during the day at Crow Track headquarters. The ranch lay some five miles west of town. After arranging to store the camp wagon with its unneeded duffel at the livery barn, the trio headed out in mid-afternoon. The trail wound on through jackpines, affording an occasional glimpse of open range.

"Ain't seen a thing yet but Crow Track steers," Sam remarked half an hour later. "Pomerene must come dang nigh to bein' cattle-poor."

"He owns in the neighborhood of eighteen-twenty thousand," Pat rejoined. "He's got about fifteen riders, and strings 'em out thin. I learned that much."

"I got Buckner down as a slave driver," Ezra put in. "He better lay off me."

The prosperous Crow Track ranch lay in a small, parklike valley. The house, large and square, stood on a rise at the edge of the pines. Below it lay outspread a bewildering maze of scattered barns, sheds, corrals, and fenced pastures. Pigs grunted, hens scratched in their pen, and many horses were to be seen milling about.

The rambling bunkhouse, standing off at one side, had its own cook shack, with a beaten yard between. As the three rode up, a group of men were to be seen gathered there as though awaiting supper. Pat's swift glance marked this Crow Track crew down for a hard-bitten bunch.

Polk Buckner was standing with them, and his dark face was dour as he took in Sam and Ezra. "When I hired you two this mornin', you didn't say yuh was ridin' with this hombre," the foreman fired out, jerking his chin contemptuously toward Pat.

"That's right, we didn't." Sam sounded innocent. "Does it make a difference?"

Buckner's tan deepened with what may have been wrath. About to boil over, while the members of his crew slyly watched, he caught himself up short in time. He stabbed his thumb toward the bunkhouse door. "Empty bunks in there, if you can find 'em," he muttered.

Putting a cheerful scrutiny on Buckner and the men with him, Pat wondered if this reception was the result merely of Polk's natural irritation over the fancied slight to his authority. If so, there was hope that the friction might wear off. But if Buckner's resentment lay deeper, a grudge whose source was hidden, perhaps rooted in the trouble that ravaged this range, there was no telling what might be in the wind for them.

With Sam and Ezra preceding him, their possible-sacks over their shoulders, Pat turned toward the bunkroom. He was on the point of stepping in at the door when something whistled past his ear, and a heavy clasp knife thudded into the door jamb alongside of his face with a force that left it quivering, the blade an inch deep in the wood.

Pat whirled, his bedroll flying aside. Hand hovering over his gun, his glance raked the Crow Track crew. Not a man of the dozen was caught in a suspicious pose—none were so much as looking this way. Studiously ignoring the bunkhouse and Pat as well, they murmured low-voiced among themselves.

"Who did that?"

Pat was striding forward, his face cold and set, Ezra and Sam sliding into the open behind him, hands on their guns.

The Crow Track crowd were looking at Pat now, registering marked surprise.

Polk Buckner's tone was gruff. "How's that, Stevens?"

Pat's slashing glance ran from face to face as he neared them, walking straight forward.

"Who threw that knife?" he snapped, in the sudden quiet.

No one spoke. They didn't intend to answer, nor did Pat expect to inquire further. He brushed close to the nearest man, the first in his path, whose air of unconcern said that, at least, *he* had nothing to worry about. Pat quickly disillusioned him.

Suddenly his fist lashed up—there was a solid thud. The amazed puncher measured his length in the dust, skidding under the tremendous force of the blow. Before he had stopped rolling, Pat bounded after and pounced on him.

A snarling whoop arose from the others, who started to mill forward; but this as suddenly stilled, and the concerted action with it.

"That's right, boys," Ezra droned over his leveled gun. "Don't go fer to forget me an' Sam—"

Stiffly the punchers shuffled back, Polk Buckner among them. The Crow Track ramrod's blocky face was tight with rage, yet he kept himself in hand.

Pat was too busy to heed anything just then. With a lunge he hauled up his dazed victim. Holding him with one hand by bunched shirt front, Pat poised a rocky fist. "Maybe you didn't toss that pig-sticker," he rasped, and added bitingly, "You didn't yell, either!"

His cocked fist smashed home, flush in the puncher's snarling face. The man shot backward as though rammed to pile up against the legs of his gaping fellows. They fell apart hastily, stumbling over one another, as Pat plunged into their midst, determined to teach them a lesson none would forget.

His adversary, a man as big as himself, had been caught off base by this whirlwind attack. Nor did he ever manage to get organized. A third blow tumbled him end over end; he tried weakly to rise, failed, and slumped back.

Pat whirled on the others. They stared at him coldly, refusing to accept the challenge.

Pat's voice rang hard and clear. "I came here to work. I'll stay if I have to chase every one of you lugs off the place. Any suggestions?"

He waited till it seemed certain they were done for this time. Then he turned to his friends. "Get your things. We're moving into that bunk shack yonder—by ourselves."

As it happened, the shack proved untenanted; but Pat would not have cared had it been necessary to move Buckner himself out to make room for them. He made no move to hasten as the supper gong rang and the sound of shuffling feet could be heard outside.

"Yuh laid the law down," Sam said. "But yuh shore didn't leave the door open for makin' any friends in that bunch."

Pat glanced at him absently. "I wouldn't be too sure of that," he returned easily.

"How do yuh figure it?"

"Make no mistake, Sam. Every man of that bunch is a twenty-minute egg. Buckner don't want any other kind. They knew I'd be forced to call their hand—they expected it. I wouldn't be surprised if some of them are fair enough to admit they got what was coming. If I know their kind, that'll never make 'em hate me. It might even swing them in my favor."

Sam thought about it. "Yuh may be right at that," he admitted slowly. "Jest don't count on it, is all."

Ezra heard them out impatiently. "What difference does it make?" he growled, starting for the door. "I'm hungry. Are yuh eatin' tonight, or not?"

5.

NONE of the Crow Track men raised their eyes above the table level as Pat and his companions stepped into the dining room and found places for themselves. Nor was anything said beyond a word or two dropped by Polk Buckner about the day's work. But as each man finished eating and stepped out, he paused for a glance backward over his shoulder from the door. In every case the hostile, withdrawn gaze flicked Stevens briefly.

Pat noticed it. Once back in their bunkroom again, Ezra mentioned this covert but unmistakable surveillance. "Ain't made up their minds about yuh yet," he remarked to Pat.

"They've got it figured out they're being snooped on," was the answer. "I wonder who gave 'em that idea?"

They followed his thought readily enough.

"Buckner's took a remarkable dislike to us all, for a ramrod who's hirin'," observed Sam.

Pat briefly explained the basis of the foreman's resentment. "He's got it in his head that I was brought here to keep cases on him," he concluded, "and you two just happened to turn up in the wrong company. It may've been a mistake at that—"

But this Sloan stoutly contradicted. "If he learned later that we're ridin' together, he'd be shore we was tryin' to pull somethin'."

Pat nodded agreement with this view. "I don't really care. It's just as well as it is. One thing, though—you two want to be mighty careful to keep out of trouble here, if it's at all possible. Buckner's almost certain to cross you up out of pure cussedness."

"Don't fret. We'll keep our nose clean."

Neither of the partners appeared at all concerned over the prospect of difficulties, but Pat caught an unholy gleam in Ezra's eye. Unworried about the big fellow's ability to take care of himself, he said no more.

If his singular assignment on Crow Track seemed obscure, by morning Pat had settled on an immediate course of action. The unlikelihood of gaining any information whatever from Pomerene's hard-boiled crew gave him no concern. The close-mouthed secretiveness displayed by these men might easily be a part of the situation he had been called on to unravel. If it was too soon to start grabbing at conclusions, time would supply the answers.

Ezra and Sam were ahead of the other men this morning, done eating and already saddled up before the rest emerged from the cook shack. Pat waited till Buckner had tersely assigned them a task for the day and they had jogged off through the pines. Then he saddled his own mount, without a glance to right or left for the various men watching his every move, and set out briskly on the road to town.

The sheriff's office in Lost Trail was a log shack set back off the street. Pat pulled open the cotton-screened door in

midmorning, to find Jeb Crotty cocked back in a chair, his battered hat beside him on the floor. The lawman's boots came down off the desk with a thump.

"Come in, Stevens—"

Seated sidewise on the edge of the desk, Pat surveyed the other with sleepy eyes. Crotty waited for him to speak.

"If I'm any judge, Crotty," Pat said at last, deliberately, "I'd put you down as being your own man."

If this was the right approach, he received no immediate sign of it. The sheriff's pale eyes narrowed inscrutably. "Thanks," he returned gruffly. "Now suppose yuh say what you're leadin' up to."

"It's important to me," Pat elaborated frankly, "to know just where you stand. No man ever worked alone, Crotty, and got any results worth a damn. Dunk Pomerene hired me, and he expects things to happen. Is Pomerene in trouble?" he demanded suddenly.

"Yuh mean financially?"

"I mean any way at all."

Crotty's heavy brows knit. "That," he said slowly, "is somethin' I ain't been able to figger out." He seemed weighing his words now. "There's times I'm inclined to believe he is, Stevens—or thinks so. I know somethin's botherin' him—"

"I got that much." Pat nodded.

"But it ain't anything that's happened—yet," Crotty thrust on, eyelids slitted in probing thought. "This is a sudden country, Stevens. Mean, too—I've even had a few cases of saddle stealin' reported lately. An' the wild shootin' goes on regular. Things break without much warnin' . . . Dunk's startin' to feel his years, I expect. He may be lookin' forward —worryin' about the future. May even be somethin' he's pretty shore has got to come."

"That daughter of his will get the ranch, I suppose—if anything should happen to him?"

"Well, there's a nephew. Young Morrill. Lives at Crow Track when he's home, which ain't much. I s'pose Dunk'll take care of him . . . But it's my understandin' that Fern will get Crow Track, yes."

"What about this rustling I've heard mentioned?"

"There is some," Crotty admitted. "I've investigated a case or two. No luck so far. I ain't prepared to say if it's organized or not."

"Has Pomerene been hit hard, would you judge?"

The sheriff's eyes crinkled. "Funny, you're askin' me that. Dunk has complained of thievery. Never gave no figures. Even Buckner puts me off . . . You ain't inferrin' this talk of Crow Track bein' rustled is jest a blind?"

"I don't know enough yet to even make a guess, Crotty. From Pomerene's talk, the rustling is only a part of the business anyway." His glance rested on Jeb thoughtfully. "No telling what I'll find out. If I should turn up with some of these tough hombres and prefer charges, are you prepared to let the law take its course?"

"Why, shore." The sheriff appeared surprised at the question. "It's what I'm here for, Stevens."

"Maybe it'll make a difference who I'm forced to bring in—"

"Hell, man!" Crotty protested impatiently. "I'll be runnin' for office again, come election time, but I never needed the crooked vote. Bring yore tough hombres in."

So worded, it did not promise as much as it seemed to do, but Pat let it go. A few minutes later he nodded his thanks and slid off the desk to go, only to pause in the door.

"One more thing." He mentioned Polk Buckner's strenuous opposition to his being hired by the Crow Track owner, and the coldness with which he and his partners had been received at the ranch.

"Do Pomerene and Buckner hit it off together pretty well, Crotty? Or is there a hitch there?"

Jeb was watching him steadily. "Yuh mean, does Dunk actually manage Crow Track—or does Polk run things to suit himself. Is that it?"

"I had something like that in mind."

Crotty's leaping eyes said that he was beginning to fire up. "Look, Stevens," he burst out gruffly. "I ain't shore yet jest why, but it was Pomerene that hired you. Dunk's a big

man; but I was elected to keep the peace in this country, not to see that he stays big. Suppose yuh get yore information from him!"

Pat grinned good-naturedly, satisfied that he had succeeded at last in prodding from the sheriff the answers to more than one question.

"Fair enough. I was just considering the possibility that he might not be as frank as you," he rejoined enigmatically. "I'll see you, Crotty."

As he mounted his horse outside, he told himself that not a man on the Yellowhammer range appeared free to speak his mind. They all put a guard on their tongue—with the possible exception of Lafe Kyle, whose fortunes had struck bottom and who struck out blindly in every direction, calling the cards exactly as he read them. Certainly it would never occur to Lafe that he might possibly be mistaken.

Pat had not forgotten Kyle's wife, courageous even in defeat. He was wondering about her as he headed in the direction of the Rocking K. The misfortune which weighed her down, he had learned in forty-eight hours, was big enough to overshadow this entire range. He found plenty to think about as his pony single-footed through the pines in the midst of a drowsy morning hush.

He first became aware that he was not absolutely alone when a shadow appeared at his right hand and he looked up to meet the stony, unwavering regard of a horseman who had appeared beside him. A slight sound caught his ear; and glancing to the left, he discovered a man there also, as ominously intent as the first. The matting pine needles had covered their silent approach. When a third man broke into the trail a dozen yards to the fore, an expression of grim triumph on his flat face, Pat understood. His lips thinned.

"This him?" the man up the trail called out, with chilling impersonality. All three were strung taut, cocked for some preplanned action.

The man on Pat's right jerked a nod. "Yeah. He's the gent who roughed up Lafe, boys," he confirmed grimly. "Let's teach him a few—"

Under cover of his words, this man edged close warily, and suddenly made a lunging snatch at Pat's holstered six-gun. Anticipating the move by a split second, Pat slapped the hand away and at the same time jabbed his spur at the haunch of the puncher's horse. The steel found its mark. The surprised bronc plunged sharply, tumbling its rider out of the saddle. The man piled up in the dirt.

He was on his legs in a flash, grabbing at his spilled Colt and whipping it down to cover Pat as his two confederates vented harsh cries of warning.

Pat had not moved, sitting his pony with slitted eyes.

"Easy, boys." His words slurred into a chilly drawl. "I ain't the runnin' kind. What's this all about?"

The man on his left rushed him, slamming his bronc into Pat's. Grappling the latter, he yanked him backward out of the hull. They landed between the two horses, and Pat squirmed around as if animated by a steel spring. His fist, traveling not more than four inches, rammed into his assailant's midriff. The man gasped and relaxed. He was done, momentarily helpless, while his rolling eyes cried out his anguish.

On his knees even as the spooked horses danced apart, Pat grabbed desperately at the reins of his own, with the vague hope of dragging himself up and using the animal as a shield. He missed; and in that moment, while he was still on one knee, the man who had first attacked him plunged at him on foot.

With arms wrapped around the other's hips, Pat saved himself from going down. But infuriated blows fell on his head and the back of his neck. He withstood that savage onslaught for a long dozen seconds, every instant expecting a bash from a gunbarrel that would knock him senseless. Then, his head in a groggy whirl, he found his feet.

He rose with an effort, lifting his antagonist violently, and hurled him down. The man bounced on his back, scrambled up, and ran in. This time Pat met him with a swing that fetched a grunt out of him. They were at it then, slugging

right and left, and it was soon apparent that Pat's rocky fists carried the greater sting.

He rocked the hard-faced puncher with a blow to the jaw and was poised to deliver the finishing chop when something hit him on the head from behind. For a space his senses reeled, but he ducked in time, whirling aside just as the third man swung at him like a man wielding an ax.

Shaking his head to clear it, Pat plunged at his treacherous foe. He caught the fellow off guard, arms upraised as he prepared to bring down the clubbed carbine in his grasp. They came together with a thud and, crashing to the ground, landed with Pat uppermost. As his wiry antagonist arched sidewise, they rolled completely over, with Pat once more coming out on top.

This time his braced knees held him there. One fist and then the other, he slammed into the snarling face under him without pity. Dark abrasions appeared on that pasty skin; an eye closed, the lids puffing.

It was more than a man could stand without throwing in the sponge. With a superhuman effort, the man on the ground wormed over, twisting Pat's leg and elbowing him at the same time. Then suddenly he was loose and clawing himself up.

Not again did he turn to meet attack, all the fight battered out of him. Instead he stumbled away, making for his horse.

Pat was hard on his heels as he flung himself astride. With a leap, Pat swung across the bronc's back even as it plunged into motion. Uttering a hoarse bawl of fury and desperation, the would-be fugitive whirled in the saddle to club at Pat with his fist. Next instant they were locked once more in violent struggle, each battling to preserve his balance and hurl the other off, as the frightened horse flashed through the pines at a wild gallop.

Pat was vaguely conscious of the crash of a gun, coming from behind, and a hot iron seared across his back as the slug raked the flesh. In a twinkling the trail was left behind, and no more shots sounded—only the wild tattoo of hoofs,

and the wind of this breakneck speed tearing at shirts and roaring in their ears.

There was little enough time to look where the wildly plunging horse was taking them, but Pat saw the deadly pine snag sweeping toward them an instant before it struck. His adversary never saw it at all. As Pat ducked low and sidewise, the snag took the other man full across the shoulders with vicious force. It swept them both from their seats. For an instant they hung in the air, a welter of flying arms and legs. Underbrush broke their fall.

Pat heeled over with a lunge, ran back, and crouched over his fallen foe. The other lay gasping, making only a feeble movement or two, face white as paper. Stark dread leaped alive in his dilated pupils as they focused on Pat.

"No more," he begged huskily. "I've had—enough—"

Pat looked him over narrowly. No bones appeared to be broken. Pat grasped him under the arms without gentleness.

"Up you come," he grunted. "I'll get you back to your pals, and they can take over."

The man made no effort to help himself, however, and after another fruitless effort, Pat gave it up.

"Lay there, then. I'll tell 'em where to find you—if they're interested."

It took several minutes to trudge back to the open trail. Pausing just inside the fringe of pines, Pat peered out. His bronc stood not far away, and he caught a glimpse of his hat lying where it had been crushed into the ground. But neither his first two assailants nor their broncs were anywhere in sight. His mouth pursed up over the discovery.

"Decided they had enough," he murmured. "Or is this a bushwhack setup?"

He devoted a patient ten minutes to circling his horse cautiously at a distance of a hundred yards before deciding the men were indeed gone.

Stepping into the open then, he took stock of himself, brushing dust and pine needles from his clothes and even his hair. The scratch on his back amounted to little. Beyond barked knuckles, a contusion or two on his face, and various

sore spots on his body, he appeared to have escaped injury.

Having slapped his crumpled Stetson into shape and made sure of his gun, he swung into the saddle once more and shoved on.

"Better get my visit to Kyle over with," he mused bleakly. "Before he takes the notion not to expect me."

6.

KYLE's little Rocking K ranch was set in an open hollow of the hills clothed with blooming sage. In the yard stood a few pines, and at first Pat could not see much. He made out the straggling pens and sheds and looked over the sturdy two-room timber cabin, thrown together haphazardly but likely to outlast Lafe Kyle's uncertain tenancy.

He caught a glimpse of Lafe, shambling about the littered yard. Kyle must have been keeping a close watch, for he disappeared quickly into a shed to emerge with a rifle in his hands. Even as Pat rode up, the other slipped behind the house.

With a long experience of his kind, Pat ignored the man's suspicious movements and made straight for the cabin door. As he drew rein, Lafe appeared at one corner and slid forward, yellow eyes wary, the rifle slanting in his grasp.

"What yuh after?" he demanded with sullen belligerence.

Easing his seat in the saddle, Pat looked him over with a pretense of severity. "Kyle, regardless of what you thought at the time, I saved you a punctured hide twice, there in town."

"I *was* a mite hasty," Lafe allowed, his prominent jaws working ruminatively. "Call it a bender."

"I ain't here to argue anybody's shortcomings," Pat resumed flatly. "All I want from you is information."

"What would yuh do with it?" Kyle grunted skeptically.

"I won't ask you to believe I'm trying to help." Pat spoke patiently, dismounting to squat on his heels, a twig in his idle hands. "If you've been cleaned out as you claim, it can't hurt any to tell how it happened."

Still Kyle manifested strong reserve. Clearly he had learned in some manner that Stevens had been hired by Crow Track, and just as plainly he could not forget it.

"What yuh want to know?" he demanded grudgingly.

"Exactly what happened to you—right from the beginning."

As he told it, Lafe's story was a rambling one of hidden persecution and harassment, by no means as circumstantial as his resentful conclusions implied. Starting with a herd of nearly a hundred head, his stock had been rustled repeatedly in small bunches, over a period of months—a process of creeping ruin Kyle had found it impossible to halt. On the basis of general suspicion, he had accused Polk Buckner. Dunk Pomerene had retaliated by having him thrown bodily off Crow Track.

Pat asked why none of the rustled steers had ever been traced. Kyle explained doggedly. Not only could stolen stock be moved out of the Yellowhammers in any direction of the compass, but in those hills it was virtually impossible to follow the trail of a drive for more than a few miles.

"This range was made to order fer rustlers, Stevens," he wound up sourly. "You can bet they grabbed their chance with both hands!"

Pat stood up, tossing the twig away.

"What gives you the idea Crow Track is behind it all?" he queried. "I'm interested in proof."

Kyle's glance was knowing. "Hell, Stevens! I ain't dumb. It's always the same story. First you're rustled—then Polk Buckner rides up an' offers to lease yore range! Three or four little owners've already folded that way. But Crow Track only gets bigger an' bigger. What would you think?"

Pat was forced to acknowledge the surface logic of the argument.

"Why haven't you little fellows banded together?" he shrewdly inquired. "That way, you might be able to do plenty."

Lafe failed to perceive the concealed barb in this natural question. "With these dang soreheads around here?" he blurted, sublimely unconscious of irony. "Unh-uh. I'll fight my own battles, an' be damned to 'em all!"

Absorbed as he was in the talk, Pat was by no means oblivious to his surroundings. It had not escaped him, minutes ago, when the slab door of the cabin opened on a crack. Sometime since, Kyle had strode to the door, thrust his rifle inside, and slammed it to after him. It may have been politeness. Pat was pondering this when the moving shadow of his horse's head, thrown on the ground at his feet, caught his eye. The bronc had turned, ears erect, to gaze toward the edge of the pines a hundred yards away.

"I suppose you know," Pat droned on colorlessly, "that I was ganged a half-hour ago in your name, Kyle?"

As he spoke, he moved closer to Lafe, whose heavy eyes had more than once rested on the fresh bruises marring Pat's face. There was little connection between his advance and the question he put, but Lafe interpreted it otherwise.

"It's a damn lie—an' quit crowdin' me, Stevens!" he burst out harshly, backing away. "I never set nobody onto yuh!"

"No. I don't think you did, myself," Pat drawled, to Kyle's surprise. Still he pressed forward, keeping a distance of only a couple of feet between himself and the flustered, half-irate rancher. "Wonder who those birds could've been?"

Kyle's mouth popped open. Before he could speak, the flat crack of a rifle rang out, coming from the distant fringe of pines. Lafe's shapeless black hat leaped from his head, as if swept off by an invisible hand.

Pat sprang forward on the instant, throwing himself in front of the amazed rancher. "Get down, Kyle! Quick!" In his haste to bundle the other toward the cabin door, Pat stumbled, and they fell together in a tangle, sprawling headlong. Again the distant rifle cracked. Dirt showered them

where they lay. Lafe, in the belief that a concerted plot was in action against him, struggled furiously.

Suddenly a carbine spanged near at hand—again—and still a third time. It seemed almost over their heads. Rolling clear, Pat craned up to see the marksman. Not Mrs. Kyle, as he had thought, but Lafe's black-haired daughter stood at the door, the smoking rifle in her hands, staring with snapping eyes at a point on the edge of the far pines, where a thin blue puff of powdersmoke was gradually dissipating. The faint thud of a racing horse came back to them, rapidly diminishing.

Kyle scrambled up, excitedly. "Good work, Rhoda!" he exclaimed gruffly. "Reckon yuh smoked 'em that time, by Godfrey!" He whirled on Pat, menace in his manner. "Knew that was comin', didn't yuh?" he accused flatly.

"When I spotted my bronc staring off there with his ears up, I did suspect something of the kind." Pat's dry manner was curt. "Haven't you got it yet, Kyle?"

"All I know is, yuh accused me of settin' some fellers onto yuh," growled Lafe. He hesitated then. "What'd they look like?"

Pat described a stocky, sandy-haired puncher with a flattened nose, a dark, sallow-faced fellow who might have been a breed of some description, and a third man wearing horsehide chaps and a bone-handled gun. Kyle nodded, his shovel jaw thrust forward.

"Brazos LaFors, and Sonny Day. I dunno the other one, but them two's Crow Track hands, Stevens. Figger that out!"

"I have," Pat rejoined coolly. "Remember, I told you I was jumped in your name. If you were shot while I was known to be on your place, what would be made of that, Kyle?"

Lafe's jaw dropped.

"By thunder!" He looked his mystification. "Don't tell me Crow Track's aimin' to have yuh took up for murder. Hell, Stevens—you're workin' for Pomerene!"

"And that don't mean I'll give him an inch. Is it any wonder that better men than you are puzzled—and fooled?"

Kyle's manner had altered markedly in the past few

minutes. "Hanged if I don't believe you're shootin' square, Stevens—"

"Took you a long time to get that far." Pat pretended disgust.

"Why're you arguin' with him, Pa?" Rhoda Kyle put in from the door, with some asperity. "He's the man we met on the trail the other night. I told you he was all right. Ma says so too—"

"You git inside, or I'll tend to you directly," Lafe snapped at her.

Reluctant to comply, the girl lingered to glance at Pat. Returning that look, he was aware of her white even teeth, revealed in a propitiating smile.

Turning his back on her, Kyle appeared anxious to make amends. "Just what are yuh tryin' to find out?" he said. "I'll talk now."

Pat soon had him discussing range conditions freely. At least once, he declared, Brazos LaFors and two other Crow Track hands had been caught drifting rustled stock out of the hills. Taxed with it, Dunk Pomerene had brushed the evidence aside.

"Sheriff Crotty know that?"

"He's been told. Says he's got to have better evidence before he can act—"

"Ought to be easy to learn where all this rustled stuff goes," Pat insisted.

"Shore. Some of us've got an idee it's bein' trailed out to Pomerene's Padlock ranch, on Split-Rock Mesa. From there it can be sold north, in the Gunnison Basin."

Pat's ears pricked up. It was the first mention of a second Pomerene holding to come his way. The fact of its existence was not without interest.

A few questions elicited the information that the Padlock range lay some fifty or sixty miles north in the mountains. According to Kyle, it consisted of a long grassy canyon enclosed by lofty cliff walls, and the manner of Pomerene's acquiring it was a story in itself. Some years ago a hard-riding band of outlaws had used the canyon as its head-

quarters, and many a fight Dunk Pomerene had had with these thieves, who persistently raided his Crow Track herds. Finally, in self-defense the rancher had gathered a large posse and, advancing on the secluded stronghold, had killed or driven every member of the outlaw band out of the country. Promptly thereafter, Pomerene had taken possession of the canyon and by painstaking effort had built it up into a good ranch.

"It's the old story, Stevens," Kyle ended. "Power begets force. Old Dunk'll never turn back. He's seen his days of honest dealin'. Now he's so hungry, he's forgot where the line between power an' crookedness runs."

"It's all mighty interesting, anyway," Pat qualified. "Why couldn't you have told me this before, Kyle?"

"Jest be sure I don't have reason to regret tellin' you now," retorted Lafe.

He was gazing away as he spoke, and Pat saw his face close warily, the prominent nostrils pinching. At a faint clip-clop of hoofs, Pat turned to look the same way. A girl was riding up to the ranch astride a trim bay whose sleek hide, shining in the sun, bespoke loving care. Pat was not surprised to recognize Fern Pomerene.

"Better call your missus out—or even the girl," Pat murmured to Kyle.

He moved toward the cabin door as he spoke, but Lafe, whether intentionally or not, blocked his path by stepping forward.

"Hold on," the rancher grunted. "Let's see what this is first—"

He waited till Fern rode forward to draw rein before them. Despite Lafe's stony unwelcoming stare, her manner was easy. Pat was once more conscious of the shock of those golden eyes.

"You're Pat Stevens." She smiled. "Lafe and I know each other—"

"What now, Miss?" Kyle demanded peremptorily, as if demonstrating his disregard of her claim of familiarity.

"I came out to see Mrs. Kyle," Fern explained, taking no

notice of his brusqueness. "I heard something of your trouble in town, Lafe. I hope to convince you both that Crow Track had nothing to do with it."

"By sayin' so, yuh mean?" Lafe countered shortly.

The girl dismounted and turned toward him with an air of candor.

"What must I say? Surely you haven't forgotten that Father lent you teams—help in building—when you came here? That he advanced you money? To this day, he's never pressed you for that, Lafe. Surely you must understand he has no need of your few possessions."

This was straight talk. If Kyle's darkening frown took no account of the moderation with which it was put, there were other listeners. Pat was not missing a word; nor, it proved a moment later, was Mrs. Kyle. The slab door opened slightly and she slipped through to stand in the opening, an anxious smile on her worn face.

"Howdy, Miss Pomerene," she said nervously, glancing at her husband.

Fern's answering smile did the girl credit. "There you are," she said warmly. "I've been meaning to ride out. I'm afraid I've delayed unpardonably—"

She moved forward naturally, as if confidently expecting to be invited in. But Lafe shoved in between at the same time, obstinately barring her way; nor did Mrs. Kyle offer to step back out of the doorway.

"Nice of you, I'm sure," the faded woman said hastily, with growing uneasiness. "It ain't as though we was prepared for—"

"Not at all!" Fern broke in, an expression of distress stealing into her eyes. "No need to put yourself out. I merely wished to talk a few minutes . . . Mrs. Kyle, how can I persuade your husband that we—Father and I—bear him no ill will? That Crow Track is being victimized, no less than himself, by his unfounded suspicions?"

There fell an awkward silence, in which Pat studied the faces of all these people with interest.

"Reckon I don't doubt yore good intentions," Lafe spoke

up grudgingly. "I jest ain't satisfied yuh know as much as yuh think yuh do, ma'am, about what's goin' on—"

"But I *do* know—perhaps better than you," the girl insisted, her warmth attesting her undeniable earnestness. "I've always followed ranch affairs closely. I am familiar to the last detail with the policy Father hopes to pursue—and what he emphatically does *not* intend doing."

Kyle was watching her narrowly. The contrast in their appearance seemed more than enough to set him against her by instinct. "Then maybe yuh can explain a few things that ain't nowise clear," he hazarded dubiously.

At this point a scuffle sounded just inside the cabin door. There was a suppressed exclamation. Rhoda's face appeared in the aperture briefly, only to disappear again, and a young fellow forced his way out abruptly, shouldering Mrs. Kyle aside.

Pat's eyes widened. It was Dale Marlin. Hatless and ruddy of cheek, after an abashed glance for Stevens, he had eyes only for Fern Pomerene, confronting her in a determined manner.

"Why don't you talk sense, Fern?" he flung at her roughly. "Anyone who didn't know you'd swear yuh was tryin' to cover up for that old highbinder of a father of yours. Snap out of it! Can't you *see* what's eatin' us all—goin' on right under your nose?"

"And what is?" Fern asked composedly.

Marlin flung out a passionate hand. "If only you could be made to see what your pa's up to, there's a chance yuh might be able to change all this—"

Manifestly this was the resumption of an old dispute between the pair. Pat filed away the knowledge that these two were on far more intimate terms than anything in Marlin's earlier talk had led him to believe.

"You're still convinced I'm being misled, Dale?" Fern's tone was indulgent, but there could be no mistaking the spots of color stealing into her cheeks. Her glance strayed over his shoulder to the door. "Perhaps the question isn't important enough to tear you away from your—company."

Pat's lips quirked at this unmistakable revelation of pique, but Marlin took it in all seriousness.

"Nonsense! I'm hidin' out here because Lafe was decent enough to take me in for a day or two, and there's nowhere else I can go," he averred stoutly.

Pat seized the opportunity to thrust into the talk. "Who're you on the run from, Marlin?" he demanded.

"Can't guess, eh? . . . Well, it's from Crow Track," was the flat answer. The puncher looked triumphantly at Fern. "They chased me out of your camp, Stevens—an' they've been foggin' me ever since."

It fitted in with what Sam Sloan had observed that night on Wolf Creek. Pat's opinion of Lafe Kyle rose a notch at his courage in offering the fugitive sanctuary, at a time when his own safety was none too secure. But he was not done with Marlin yet.

"Why is Crow Track on your trail?"

"Because I stood up for Lafe, here, for one thing; and for another, because I wouldn't run after Vernon folded."

Vernon was the owner of V Slash, allegedly smashed by Crow Track, for whom Marlin had worked. Pat eyed the latter in sober thought. "Marlin," he said, "what did you do with the cash from my bedroll?"

The young fellow's lean face flashed red with anger. It was impossible not to see that the question came to him out of a clear sky. Somehow he kept a grip on himself. "I don't know what you're talkin' about. I haven't got ten dollars to my name right now—an' be damned to yuh!"

"Rode off with my saddle, didn't you?"

"Yes—I did!" Marlin had the grace not to point out its virtual worthlessness. "That proves how much chance I had of buyin' one. My own was stole—and besides, I wanted you to stay in this country, Stevens. I figured that'd hold yuh here."

Fern Pomerene spoke up with unexpected heat. "What foolishness is this? Are you accusing Dale of stealing money?" Her eyes flashed dark with resentment. "You might be excused for such a mistaken idea, Pat Stevens, but I know

him! He wouldn't lower himself to thieving—you can accept that as final!"

Scanning that earnest face, so pretty in anger, Pat was ready to concede the sincerity of her defense.

"And the saddle?" he insisted.

Fern's mouth only grew more determinedly set. "Dale's explained that, I think satisfactorily—according to his lights. But I'm ready to swear he'd never in this world lay hands on a penny that didn't belong to him, and that's all there is to it!"

Having settled the matter to her own satisfaction, she turned to Marlin with no diminution of warmth. "All the same, you're dead wrong about Crow Track, Dale, and I insist on proving it. We'll ride back to the ranch right now and talk with Dad. Never for an instant has he planned the ruin of any rancher on this range—much less the hounding of any one man. Perhaps if you hear him swear that in so many words, you'll believe me?"

Marlin stared at her in amazement. "Ride out to Crow Track now?" he echoed harshly. "Me? With Polk Buckner waitin' out there?" He laughed the idea to scorn. "There ain't much I wouldn't do for you, Fern, merely for the askin'—but it don't include walkin' into that bear trap!"

7.

WITH MARLIN'S flat declaration, it was plain that matters had come to an impasse between the two. Fern Pomerene turned away, hurt in her eyes.

"I—I'm afraid I have no more to say," she said haltingly. "I won't bother any of you further—"

Marlin, in frank distress, though he refused to yield his point, made hoarse efforts at appeasement; but she was not

listening. Pat helped her to mount her horse. "If you're heading back to town, ma'am, I'll ride along," he murmured.

She flashed him a grateful look and waited till he was ready. Turning in the saddle, Pat gestured farewell to the Kyles and Marlin, but Fern could not bring herself to look around. Far from satisfied as he was about the money, Pat was not worrying. He had seen enough to feel certain this girl would hold Marlin in the country.

"It's foolish of me, I know," she burst out as soon as they were alone. "But how can I possibly persuade them how wrong they are?" She glanced at Pat beseechingly. "This atmosphere of hatred and misunderstanding is slowly killing Father—and it only goes on growing!"

"I wouldn't think about it if I were you," Pat told her quietly. "Things may get better."

She was so agitated that he gave over his plan to question her. Slowly, however, Fern's natural courage asserted itself, until by the time they drew near to Lost Trail the girl was once more chatting of many things with her usual animation.

"I hope we're not late for the stage," she said as they entered the upper end of the street. "I'm meeting it today."

"Company coming?"

"Not exactly," she said. "We're expecting my cousin, Ranse Morrill, home. Ranse is—well, sensitive sometimes, and I promised Father I'd meet him."

Sheriff Crotty had mentioned Pomerene's nephew. Pat silently decided to have a look at the man.

"Sensitive?" he echoed at random. "Morrill lives at Crow Track, don't he?"

"Yes—it's his home. But Ranse is away a lot," she added wistfully.

"You mean he and Dunk don't hitch?"

"Of course they do!" If Fern was faintly indignant now, it sounded forced. "Why, Ranse will share a part of Crow Track with me someday."

Pat grunted. "Your father'll last a long time yet—"

The girl grew grave. "I hope so! But Father has a heart condition. He's had attacks in the past. Excitement is not

good for him—and I worry about it when he and Ranse . . ."

"When they what?" Pat prompted.

Fern appeared weighing her answer. "I'm afraid Ranse feels himself neglected in some ways," she explained. "He's very ambitious, really—and Father is inclined to question his experience and judgment."

"Then they do wrangle some—?"

"They've had words," she admitted, anxious to minimize the importance of this. "But I understand Ranse's viewpoint. He thinks Father is far too lenient." She turned to Pat with a burst of feeling. "If only range conditions would improve, it would solve everything. That's why I count so much on you, Pat. I only hope you make progress quickly!"

Pat's glance was humorous. "I'm moving along, if I do have trouble getting at the facts . . . How do you and Morrill get along with Buckner?"

"Why, I never thought about it much. Need we 'get along' with him? Polk receives his orders, and as foreman he carries them out."

Pat nodded. He had watched Buckner receiving his orders from Pomerene himself, and Polk had taken it with an air of covert rebellion. Did he indeed carry them out—or please himself?

They had dismounted to seat themselves on the boarding-house porch, out of the hot afternoon sun. Pat was about to speak further of the Crow Track foreman when Fern sprang up.

"There's the stage," she exclaimed.

The swaying old Concord coach rattled forward and drew up with a flourish before the steps. The girl was beside it before the door creaked open. Standing on the porch, Pat noted with approval the lithe straightness of her back and her free-swinging stride in the riding clothes which became her so well. Then his eye met the man stepping down out of the stage.

Dusty as he was from the long ride, Ranse Morrill was still dapper. Dressed in a fawn-colored jacket of flawless cut, suède trousers, and stitched riding boots, he looked more

like the scion of a rich family than the nephew of a hard-working rancher. Pat guessed him to be in his middle twenties, with a bold, slightly arrogant face; and in that fleeting moment of observation, the latter's judgment was swift. Among men, Morrill's appearance was insignificant except for dark, raking eyes, which took Stevens in completely without seeming to leave Fern for more than an instant.

"You're home, Ranse," the girl greeted him in her friendly way. "Father will be glad—"

"Damned if I know why I came," Morrill grumbled discontentedly, slapping the dust from his pearl-gray Stetson. "If there's a worse way to travel than that stage, I don't know it."

He turned negligently as Fern introduced him to Pat, and was so intent on his own discomforts as scarcely to hear what the girl said. "Howdy, Stevens." His handshake was limp and brief. "Working for Crow Track, eh? I'll see you around then."

He turned away, giving all his attention to Fern. Stepping back as they moved off, Pat did not think it strange that Ranse seemed much taken with his handsome cousin, despite his proprietary air. He made no effort to rejoin them when, ten minutes later, they rode out of town together on their way to Crow Track ranch.

"So that's Ranse Morrill," he mused. It was perhaps the clearest glimpse he had yet received of Dunk Pomerene's essential character, since obviously the cattleman had spoiled his nephew in a manner that could not be charged to his account in the case of his daughter. Pat shook his head over the unaccountable vagaries of humanity, but it did not occur to him that young Morrill need be taken seriously into consideration in the matters which engaged his own attention.

He was still sitting on the boardinghouse porch when two men rode up to the saloon across the way and dismounted. It was Dunk Pomerene with a prosperous-looking man Pat did not know. Talking animatedly, the pair stepped into the bar.

The late sun was low and evening shadows began to claim

the street. Sitting there, his mind on many things, Pat was on the point of rising in search of supper when two more riders jogged in at the upper end of town. They waved to a man arriving from the other direction, and all strolled toward the saloon.

Soon more men came, calling to one another, creating a small bustle of activity in the sleepy street. Pat sat forward. It looked almost like an intentional gathering, and he was scarcely reassured on seeing Lafe Kyle ride in and move in his turn toward the Only Chance.

Pat forgot all about supper. He got out of his chair and sauntered across to the bar.

Pomerene and his companion were standing with a couple of drinks before them, their heads together, and the new arrivals were gathered, a little noisily, at the upper end of the room. Pat casually bellied up alongside the Crow Track owner. It was a moment before Dunk turned to glance at him.

"Howdy, Stevens," he said bluffly. "Meet my friend, Henry Sayre. Stock dealer from Durango. I do business with him—in fact, I'm makin' a deal now."

Pat shook hands, and a few minutes' talk served to assure him that such stock transactions as concerned Crow Track cattle appeared to be normal and legitimate.

"Wal, Stevens," Pomerene began, as a pause fell. "Makin' progress, I hope—"

"I wanted to speak to you about that." Pat paused. "Maybe we can step outside for just a minute—"

Dunk seemed taken aback at this proposal and reluctant to leave his business associate. "Can't it wait?" he growled.

Pat eyed him levelly. "Should it?"

With a grunt, Pomerene turned impatiently toward the door. Outside, he whirled on Pat almost harshly. "What is it, Stevens?"

"You gave me a job, and forgot to mention exactly what it was. You expect results," Pat drawled flatly, to nail his attention, "but you won't help."

Pomerene stiffened. "What do yuh want from me?" he barked.

"Information."

"Wal—?"

"Pomerene," said Pat shortly, "is Polk Buckner any damned good?"

Dunk began to swear. "Would he be workin' for me if he wasn't? . . . Why d'yuh ask that?" he broke off, wrathfully.

"Because you don't seem to know what your own men are up to." Pat mentioned his reception at Crow Track, the plight of Dale Marlin, and one or two other examples of Crow Track's arrogance.

"Stevens, it's precisely because I figured yuh could handle men that I hired yuh," the rancher exploded, intolerantly.

"I know. That don't bother me none," Pat told him.

"Then why come to me with a lot of wild stories? I told yuh first off to go your own gait. You've got an absolutely clear track—"

"Is this your method of dealing with Buckner?" Pat retorted thinly. "Hand him his instructions and turn him loose? . . . Another thing. What is it you're afraid of, Pomerene?"

Dunk's whipped-up choler seemed ostentatious. "What—What? Damned if I ever heard of such gall!" he fumed.

"Oh—I know you've got guts," Pat inserted smoothly. "Right now, I think you're foolish to hang around this bar, but that's no business of mine. Is it some kind of a dare?" he pursued curiously.

Pomerene stilled, plainly mystified. "What yuh mean by that?"

Pat gestured inside. "You must know how those men in there feel about you. That bunch includes every little rancher in the Yellowhammers."

"Hell, I know 'em all," Dunk protested. "They're my neighbors—"

"And just itching to comb your hide." Pat nodded curtly. "My advice to you, Pomerene, is to go on home. I'll stick around and watch."

Dunk snorted fiercely. Plainly he had reached the end of his patience. "I'll do no such thing! You'll be better off, Stevens, if yuh stop worryin' about nothin'!"

He brushed through the batwing doors and disappeared inside. Pat shrugged. It had not escaped him that Pomerene had neatly avoided answering any of his questions. It was dusk now. As he stood there undecided, a dark figure joined him. It was Jeb Crotty. The sheriff peered inside with a troubled face.

"Ain't Pomerene got 'nough sense to leave town while the goin's good?" he muttered, his anxious glance lingering on the men at the upper end of the bar.

"I tried to persuade him myself, Crotty, but he wouldn't listen."

"The old fool can be stubborn when he wants." Jeb rubbed his angular chin, then abruptly started inside. "He'll listen to me, all right."

Pat watched him accost the rancher and talk to him for a moment in a low tone. Pomerene's dour expression altered as he listened. Turning, he must have been making his excuses to the cattle buyer, for a moment later he swung away and hurried to the door.

Moving aside in the shadows, Pat watched as Pomerene went down the steps, swung astride his horse, and jogged briskly off. Crotty emerged as the rancher faded from view. Pat turned to him.

"Pretty smooth, Crotty. How'd you do it?" he asked.

"Told him that useless nephew of his was here, pawin' the dirt an' lookin' for trouble—"

Pat's smile was thin. "Live and learn," he murmured. It occasioned a sober second thought concerning Ranse Morrill, for he was beginning at last to understand where Pomerene's most earnest hopes and wishes centered. It seemed sheer blindness—with such a daughter as Pomerene possessed. Was the rancher trying to realize his blasted hopes for a son in pampering the spoiled and arrogant nephew?

With Crotty, Pat strolled toward the lawman's darkened office. Neither had his mind on what he was saying, and they

spoke desultorily of minor things. Pat waited at the door till Jeb had lighted his smoky lamp. They were about to sit down when the cotton screen rattled and a man appeared in the opening.

Pat was aware of gleaming black eyes fastened on the sheriff. They belonged to the lithe breed with whom Pat had clashed on the trail to Kyle's Rocking K. He had his nerve, putting in an appearance here. Pat waited for him to speak.

"What is it, LaFors?" Crotty growled shortly.

Brazos waved a slim dark hand toward the street. "These men in the saloon," he muttered. "They gather in the back room, Sheriff. They talk, talk. A meeting, I think. You know them. It don't look good to me."

Pat understood his object at once. The men in the Only Chance were all small owners, and only today he had asked Kyle why they hadn't banded together. LaFors, he recalled, was a Crow Track hand.

Crotty looked disgusted, yet uneasy. "I s'pose you'd like me to charge 'em with unlawful assembly or some such thing—"

The breed's shrug was expressive. "You are sheriff, no? I warn you beforehand, is all. You do what you like."

Without more words he turned away, having ignored Pat altogether. The screen slammed, and he was gone. His brevity, however, could hardly have been better calculated in its effect. Crotty sat down, squirmed in his chair briefly, vented a grunt that was akin to a groan, and quickly arose.

"Dang him, he's purt' near right," he got out in exasperation. "If there's a meetin' goin' on up there, the kind I think it is, I ought to break it up—"

"Why?" Pat's tone was stolid.

"Yuh ain't suggestin' I let 'em go ahead an' plan their raid on Crow Track?"

"What makes you so sure it's that?"

"Dammit—what else would it be?" Crotty was fretful but determined. "Mebby they ain't schemin' no rough stuff—but I got to go up there an' scatter 'em."

"I won't stand in the way of your duty," Pat said. "But

this time I've got a feeling you're wrong. Will you follow my lead long enough to prove it, one way or another?"

Crotty hesitated, plainly undecided. Finally he spoke. "What's yore idea, Stevens?"

"Douse that light."

A moment later they slipped softly out of the shack. Pat led the way up street. A one-story blacksmith shop with a long, slanting roof stood next the Only Chance, with an alley between. It was closed at this hour. They moved round to the back, and by careful search Pat found a box on which they could mount to the roof without undue noise.

"Aimin' to do a little spyin', eh?" Crotty muttered, clambering upward.

"We'll take a look," Pat returned guardedly. "Easy does it, Crotty."

Cautiously they crawled across the yielding shake roof, mounting slowly and working toward the side overlooking the saloon. At last they reached the edge.

The back room of the Only Chance was on this side of the building. A window stood open on the hot night for the sake of what little breeze there was. Pat and Crotty were able to look directly down on the notched and scarred table inside, around which the men were gathered.

"Thought so," Pat murmured, crouching so that the outflowing light of a lamp did not fall on his face. "Take a gander, Sheriff. There's your dangerous characters!"

Drinks, piles of chips, and a few cards were scattered about the table over which the ranchers of the Yellowhammer range were bent. Pat's meaning was plain. Far from conspiracy, their most serious occupation at the moment was an innocuous table-stake round of poker.

Crotty uttered a snort of disgust over his needless apprehension. "False alarm, eh? Yuh were right, Stevens . . . Damn that slick-tongued LaFors, anyhow! Let's get down from here before I feel like a fool!"

He was turning to go when the crash of a gun, coming out of the night from some undetermined point, shocked them to stillness. Pat whirled, his glance stabbing downward. As he

expected, the treacherous shot had been aimed at the back-room window, and the slug had flown all too true.

All the men in the room but one were on their feet, the poker game forgotten. The single exception, a man in a checked cotton shirt, lay sprawled over the table where he had fallen, his hat rolled to the floor. He did not move.

8.

Brazos LaFors was standing idly, back to the bar, when Crotty and Pat came hurrying into the saloon a couple of minutes later. Pat scrutinized the breed sharply, as they strode past and pushed into the back room.

"Who is it?" Crotty demanded.

The ranchers gathered about the table broke rank. "It's Chuck Hoyt, Sheriff," one exclaimed. "Somebody shot him through the window, from outside in the dark. He's bad hurt—"

Hoyt had already been laid across the table, his shirt slashed away from a wound near the shoulder. Pat and Crotty bent over him. A thin stream of blood oozed down the bronze chest. The man was conscious.

"Is it bad, Crotty?" he whispered hoarsely, anxiously scanning the sheriff's grave impassive face.

"Don't talk," Pat told him shortly. He took the pan of water and clean rags that were handed over, and soon had a compress bound on Hoyt's wound. "Just turn your head, yes or no. Is there blood in your throat? Can you taste any?"

Hoyt shook his head weakly, eyes hopeful. Pat studied him briefly. "Somebody tried to get you, Hoyt. It was a narrow squeak, but I think you'll pull out. The slug went high. There's a chance it missed the lung." Pat straightened, turning. "Get a long board or an old door," he directed the

waiting men. "We'll carry him over to the boardinghouse. Somebody else can go for the doctor—"

A glance told that these men were tense with anger. Given instructions, however, they acted quickly enough. Hoyt was moved across the street and established in bed. Pat saw Dr. Dever, a stout, puffing old fellow carrying a black bag, hurrying up the boardinghouse steps.

The buzz of a hot discussion was sweeping the saloon when Pat and Crotty turned back inside. Filled with wrath, the ranchers were on a hair trigger over the senseless shooting of Chuck Hoyt. But none knew where to turn. Brazos LaFors still stood alone at the bar, lending a wary ear to whatever was said. Crotty scowled at the breed, and his chilly eye slid around to Pat in an inquiring way. Pat's nod was just perceptible. Crotty stepped forward.

"LaFors, where were you when that shot was fired?"

Brazos' sullen eyes jumped at the question. Then a veil drew over the snaky pupils. "Right here," he muttered.

Pat was watching him closely. He wasted no time checking this claim, his glance going instead to the bartender. "That right?" he snapped.

Swabbing the bar, the other man did not even look at LaFors. "For all I know, Brazos was home in bed at the time," he answered laconically. "He wasn't here. Slipped in two minutes afterward."

The breed's thin, supple frame must have been tensed for this moment. His left hand, holding the whisky glass, twitched sidewise, sloshing the dregs of his drink full in the bartender's face. On the instant, his right hand whipped to his waist.

Crotty shot and missed, his slug raking into the bar, as Brazos sprang aside. The breed's bullet flew over Crotty's head, and there was a jingling crash, a brief flare-up of light, as the hanging lamp blinked out.

It was Pat who sprang toward the open window on the other side of the saloon. Others divined Brazos' intention as well. One of the ranchers got in Pat's way, hampering him. Still he almost made it, grappling LaFors as the latter flung

himself toward the window. Brazos was slippery as an eel. For a moment they struggled fiercely.

It was the angry rush by half a dozen vengeful ranchers, designed to mob Brazos and bear him to the floor, that dislodged Pat's grip on the breed and sent him reeling. LaFors swayed toward the open sash and, toppling out, disappeared in the darkness.

Pat delayed an instant to pick up his gun, which had jarred out of the scabbard, then made for the door. There was a rush of stamping feet as the chagrined ranchers followed suit. Yells rang out.

Having reached the porch, Pat sprang to its end and dropped to the ground, facing the rear of the place. The faint light of the street must have silhouetted him, for a gun cracked from the rear corner, the slug fluttering past his face. Pat plunged that way, only to halt after a dozen strides. The iron stamping of hoofs broke sharply—swept toward him.

There was no questioning LaFors' cold nerve. His pony had been tethered behind the saloon, waiting. Rather than take a chance on the unrelieved darkness back there, he meant to make the break, straight through his would-be captors, into the street.

A shapeless blot of shadow loomed directly before Pat, bearing down on him with a rush. He dodged aside. The crash of his gun was simultaneous with the orange flash of the breed's. Both shot with deadly intent, but the odds were too great. Brazos couldn't see in the thick gloom of the alley, and he was moving too fast to hit. As if sensing his failure, he chopped downward with his gunbarrel as he swept past, and the blow came within an ace of connecting.

Pat's hat flew off. He whirled and threw down again as Brazos and the bronc appeared in the mouth of the alley. His slug screamed off the cantle of LaFors' saddle. Then, with a rush, Brazos was gone.

Pat picked up his hat and moved to the street in time to see several men swing away from the racks, lifting their broncs in swift pursuit. He knew how useless that was.

Crotty met him at the saloon steps. "Yuh all right?" he queried gruffly.

Pat stood looking after the racing riders, sweeping away at the end of the street. He shook his head. "They should've left us to do that job in our own way," he murmured.

"Brazos is a slippery hombre," said Crotty, in terse extenuation. "Next time, I won't ask him to confess—"

"Know where to look for him, do you?"

"I know where to try."

Crotty jerked his hat down, turning away. Five minutes later, mounted and ready to ride, he found Pat waiting for him. Without a word, ignoring the calls from men moving about the shadowy street, they fell in side by side and turned toward the trail to Crow Track.

"Reckon there ain't no shadow of a doubt Brazos tossed that slug at Hoyt," the sheriff muttered as they rode on under the ghostly, looming pines. "Must've figured to throw me off the scent, comin' to my office first that way."

"LaFors is playing his own game," Pat assented. He told how Brazos and the other men had jumped him on the Rocking K trail. Crotty grunted at the end.

"He don't want yuh interestin' yoreself in Crow Track affairs at all," he commented.

When Pat added an account of the attempt on Lafe Kyle's life, which had failed, the lawman seemed puzzled.

"I don't savvy that—"

"Don't you?" Pat was sententious. "If we catch up with LaFors, maybe we can persuade him to explain."

A full half mile from Crow Track, they saw lights blazing all over the house. Crotty peered forward keenly. "Somethin' goin' on there," he hazarded tightly. "Place is all lit up—"

Pat knew what was in his mind. As a Crow Track hand, Brazos LaFors might be expected to turn up here, once he found himself in a jam. To Crotty, all this activity at the ranch house spelled the preparation for a defense.

Pat was hard put to it to keep up with him as they shoved their horses forward. The sheriff knew the value of an unex-

pected arrival. He swung down from his saddle in the muffling dust of the yard and ran across to the house. With Pat only a few steps behind him, he banged loudly on the door.

There was a wait during which the sheriff's frame stiffened with impatience. He was about to throw his rawboned weight against the door when it jerked open in his face.

Fern Pomerene stood there, her eyes large and questioning. "It's you, Sheriff? . . . Come in—and you too, Pat."

At a glance the latter could see that something was bothering her, a tenseness of manner she had not shown that afternoon.

"We want to see Dunk pronto," Crotty told her brusquely.

"I'm afraid it's impossible," the girl surprised him by saying. "If there's anything I can help you with—"

Crotty looked at her as if sensing an evasion. "Can't see Pomerene? What's the trouble with him?" he demanded suspiciously.

"He's—had an attack," she stammered. "It's his heart again, I'm afraid."

"Yuh mean on account of LaFors?" he rifled at her.

"Who?" Fern looked blank. "Oh—Brazos. No. He hasn't been here, Sheriff." She was returning his gaze, with a preoccupied air. "I don't understand. You mean you're—looking for Brazos now?"

Crotty's eyes were roving past her, around the room, and he ignored her question. "You're shore Brazos ain't been here?" he insisted.

The girl began to grow warm. "If he had, why should I tell you different, Mr. Crotty?"

Jeb turned back, shouldering Pat aside as if driven by haste. "Sorry, ma'am. I got to look around first," he threw at her as he started away. Pat and the girl were left facing each other in silence.

"Has Brazos done something—?" she began.

"Looks like he took a shot at Chuck Hoyt tonight," he told her. "Crotty braced him with it in the saloon, and La-

Fors threw lead and ran . . . Crotty's got the notion that news of it is what floored your dad, I expect."

"But that's absurd!" Her clear brows clouded at this announcement of further violence. "LaFors knows better than to come here. If he's done wrong, Father would have nothing further to do with him."

Pat didn't argue the matter. "What did happen?" he asked.

She valiantly fought back her dread and distress. "It was Ranse . . . again. Father wasn't here when we arrived this afternoon. He came soon afterward—and at supper, Ranse started in on him." She broke off, looking at her hands.

"What for?" Pat prompted gently.

"Ranse wants the management of our Padlock ranch in his hands. He practically demanded it . . . Oh, I wish Dad would agree, and get it over with. Anything to keep him from upsetting himself like this!"

"I take it your dad refused, then."

"He did, of course. Ranse doesn't understand the meaning of diplomacy. There was an argument. Father got hotter and hotter. Suddenly his face flushed red—he staggered—" She could not go on.

More than a little disgruntled with this officious nephew, who was treated too well and who acted so badly in return, Pat heard her out grim-faced.

"Where's Morrill now?" he asked abruptly.

"I don't know, Pat. He—stormed out in a huff. He hasn't come back."

He took one of her hands in his easy way, gripping it hard. "Take it easy, Fern," he advised. "Dunk'll be all right, I'm sure. Sometimes these little explosions have a way of clearing the air." He turned then. "I'd better see what Crotty's up to."

He found the sheriff making for the bunkhouse, having quietly scouted the corrals and outbuildings. Nowhere had he found a sign of the breed's horse, but he was not ready to give up. There was a light in the bunkhouse, and one or two men were still up. Crotty banged on the door. A gruff voice answered.

"Buckner there?" Jeb asked sharply.

There was a sound of movement, and Polk's voice answered.

"Crotty? . . . Come in, man. What yuh after—"

"I want yuh out here," was Crotty's stern reply. "Right away, Polk."

Buckner muttered an oath. They heard him stamping into his boots. A moment later his big frame filled the door, and he peered at them in the soft gloom.

"Wal?" he growled.

"I'm after Brazos LaFors," Jeb said uncompromisingly. "He in there now?"

"Hell, no." Polk answered promptly, but his interest was caught. "What'd he do?"

Crotty brushed over that. "You're shore he ain't around? He ain't been here?"

Buckner said softly, "Yuh want me to repeat it, Crotty?"

"How long since you last saw Brazos, Buckner?" Pat put in quietly.

Polk glanced toward him inscrutably. "Day or so."

"What was his last chore?"

Pat was wondering if the foreman would get this allusion to this morning's brush with LaFors and his confederates on the trail. Polk remained unmoved, however.

"Oh, hell," he grunted. "Brazos is a trigger-happy fool. If yuh must know, I gave him his time for beefin' Rafter H. steers. He ain't ridin' for Crow Track no more."

If Crotty was surprised by this information he did not show it, but pressed his questions until he was satisfied Buckner was telling the truth. He got nowhere, and in the end turned away with a grunt.

"S'pose I could search them bunks," he growled to Pat. "But if LaFors was fired—an' there ain't no reason to believe otherwise—Brazos wouldn't be interested in Crow Track no more. Why would he come here?"

"And if that's the case," Pat took the occasion to remind him, "then knocking off Hoyt definitely wasn't one of his Crow Track chores, either. It lets Pomerene out."

Crotty thought that over, standing there in the darkness. "By grab, that's a fact!" he exclaimed. And then, perplexedly, "What was Brazos doin' it for, anyway?"

"Buckner says he caught Brazos shooting Rafter H stock. Isn't that Hoyt's spread?" Pat queried.

"Sure! That's the hookup." The sheriff grew animated. "LaFors was squarin' with Hoyt for gettin' him fired." He sighed. "You're mighty quick on the pickup, Stevens. There ain't no use lookin' here any further. I'll get along."

Pat walked with him to his horse. "I hope you find Brazos, Crotty. I'll be on the watch for him myself. If I nail him, he's yours."

Crotty jogged away, and after looking toward the house undecidedly, Pat headed for the bunk shack containing his friends.

Sam Sloan was standing crouched, gun in hand, in his rumpled underwear when Pat got the lantern lit. Ezra's single piercing eye peeped over a bunk's edge.

"You, huh?" Sam grunted, tossing the gun aside. "Where yuh been—what yuh been doin'?"

Pat recounted the day's adventures, leading up to Brazos LaFors' escape and the pursuit with Sheriff Crotty. He repeated Polk Buckner's words.

"Is that straight, Sam? Was LaFors fired as he says?" he asked.

"There was a big row anyhow," Sam allowed. "I didn't see Brazos around here las' night, but he showed up this mornin'. Buckner was chewin' with two, three strangers—Rafter H was their brand. Then Polk lit into LaFors, an' when it was over, the breed rode off talkin' to hisself. I expect he got his time."

They talked it over at length, and Pat said, "For once, Buckner seems to be shooting square. I could see he didn't like my questions about LaFors, there in front of Crotty, though." He thought awhile. "You kept out of trouble today, I hope?"

"No trouble," Ezra assured him.

"I don't think Crow Track had any connection with

Hoyt's shooting—or Buckner either, for that matter," Pat went on. "Maybe it was just an accident that it looked so much like it. All the same, I want you two to watch yourselves mighty close. When Buckner strikes, he won't send us a letter first . . . Will you do that?"

"Sure, Pat," they exclaimed in unison. "Git yore pants off an' climb in bed," Sam added grumpily. "Dang it all, are we gittin' some sleep tonight, or ain't we?"

9.

"I WANT THIS ARM of the valley swept clean," Polk Buckner said stolidly. "Comb all them draws runnin' up onto Lizard Ridge, over there—an' don't miss the other side of Lizard, either. If any old mosshorns break back on yuh, keep a close tally. Got that?"

Sam Sloan nodded, his glance straying absently to his lanky partner's face.

It was early morning, the sun just lifting above the spike-topped pines rimming the eastern horizon. Today was to see the commencement of the gather of over a thousand two- and three-year-olds which Dunk Pomerene had sold to Sayre, the Durango buyer. The Crow Track ramrod had ridden out with Sam and Ezra to assign them their day's task. His manner was sour, but since he confined himself to the work in hand, they made no comment, having only to follow instructions.

"Another thing," said Buckner. "Haze back any strays that's been driftin' in on us, but don't waste time. If yuh reach the lower valley by noon, the rest of us'll be workin' that section," the foreman concluded as he turned his horse away. "I'll tell yuh what to do then."

"Ain't expectin' much from a man, is he?" Ezra grunted

sarcastically, watching Buckner jog off without a backward glance. "Reach the lower valley by noon! With all them draws to comb—an' the other side of Lizard as well?"

"Reckon he don't like this surprise roundup much, hisself," Sam hazarded shrewdly. "Keep a tally of the brush hiders! Know what that means?"

"What's yore guess?" Ezra tossed back, with scant respect.

"Pomerene suspects he's bein' rustled, an' he's ordered a general count," Sam explained triumphantly. "I got it right away."

"Wonderful!" Ezra exclaimed. "Yuh ain't got a headache, have yuh?" he broke off to inquire solicitously.

"Me?" Sam was innocently surprised. "No. I feel fine. Why?"

"Thought yuh might have, with all that heavy thinkin'," Ezra snarled. "How 'bout kickin' some activity into that bronc, an' we'll git goin'—unless yuh'd rather spend the night in the woods!"

Despite the bickering that was habitual with them, they were well enough pleased to be working by themselves, for the unbending hostility of the entire Crow Track crew had already begun to get under their skin. Neither had been backward in showing the rough side of his tongue in return; and Sloan concluded this prudent policy had finally borne fruit, since today was the first time they had been turned loose together and by themselves.

They set to work with characteristic energy, hazing the Crow Track steers down out of the draws gashing the flank of Lizard Ridge. This was a high, pine-clothed spine of porphyry; and having worked its length by midmorning, they found it no easy chore to crowd their mounts up the precipitous slope to the top.

Lizard Ridge dropped off more gradually on the far side, and here the partners found a rich and well-watered range of a kind to make many a less fortunate rancher envious. Somewhat to their puzzlement, however, they rode for half a mile without seeing so much as a single Crow Track animal.

"Somethin' queer here." Sam was immediately on the scent. "Looks as if this range had been driven right recent—"

At last they succeeded in locating a wild-eyed old steer bearing the Crow Track mark, which managed with ease to elude their combined efforts to turn it.

"Hell, let him go!" Ezra yelled at last, wrathfully. "We ain't makin' no one-cow roundup—"

"He's ducked the comb before," Sam nodded thoughtfully. "Livin' the life o' Riley here, all by hisself . . . Ez, this looks queerer an' queerer to me. Yuh figger this range has been rustled?"

"Wal, there's *been* stock in here," Ezra returned. "Signs all over the place. We'll go on a ways."

They rode the length of the ridge on this side, without catching a glimpse of more Crow Track cattle, and were on the point of turning back when Sam held up a hand. They halted, listening. The faint sounds of stock driving drifted to them through the trees from a distance of half a mile or more—the echoing cries of men and the occasional hoarse protest of a steer. Ezra pointed out the direction.

"Yuh s'pose it's some of Buckner's men, drivin' the gather?" he wondered aloud.

"Near's I know, Crow Track range runs on fer two or three miles this way," said Sam. "What else could it be, unless—?"

Ezra shoved his bronc into motion. "Come on," he rasped. "We're findin' out!"

They made the best time they could over the uneven ground. Coming out on a rise ten minutes later, Sam gazed downslope through the thinning trees, and swore.

"That ain't Crow Track stuff!" he burst out harshly.

It was true. Ezra saw a wave of steers breaking through the pines, coming toward them. He peered sharply, his one eye squinting. "Rafter H," he grunted. "Must be five hundred head, Sam—an' four men, drivin' 'em onto Crow Track graze!"

Sam's jaw clicked shut and he nodded. "Chuck Hoyt's stuff. They're squarin' with Crow Track fer that slug in Hoyt's ribs!"

"Brazos LaFors ain't Crow Track no more," Ezra protested.

Sam shot him a scornful look. "Would yuh swear to that —in spite of anything Polk Buckner says?"

Ezra was gnawing his lip, watching the oncoming waves of steers. "There ain't no time to git to Buckner now with this—"

"No, we got to turn 'em back by ourselves," Sam said doggedly. "We're on our own, Ez, an' it's up to us to make it stick!"

Side by side they rode out into the open, heading toward the sweat-stained man who rode point before the Rafter H steers. Seeing them at last, this man turned uncertainly in his saddle.

Sloan threw up a hand commandingly.

"Turn 'em back!" he bellowed. "Yuh can't get away with it, mister!"

The Rafter H puncher read their hostile intent. He half-jerked a rifle from his saddle boot, and again hesitated. He did not appear to have heard very well above the bellowing of the steers, but the tone of Sam's voice could hardly be misinterpreted.

Another man came angling forward, slipping through the pines, an air of alertness riding him. He pulled up fifty yards away, facing the pair boldly. "What you two after?" he called out, with severity.

"What *you* doin' here, yoreselves?" Ezra hurled back. "Them cows ain't bein' throwed onto Crow Track graze, because we're stoppin' it right here!"

"What?" The Rafter H hand began to curse luridly. "Man, this ain't Crow Track! You're off the reservation!"

"Are, huh?" Sam was beginning to fire up. "We'll damn soon chase you off it, brother!" He started to push forward, Ezra at his side. "Turn them steers!" he yelled at the point man.

This time the latter did pull his rifle out of the boot. He was working the lever when Ezra's snap shot caused him to

whirl his horse backward and run for it. The rifle cracked. A slug whined off a rock beside Sam.

The second Rafter H man was yelling furiously now. His words could not be made out, but he seemed to be ordering them away. His gun came up at the same time.

Sam unlimbered his Colt. Firing from the hip, he seemed scarcely to have bothered taking aim; but the Rafter H hand reeled in his saddle. His horse chose this moment to unwind, and for a minute he had all he could do to keep from crashing out of the saddle.

"Watch it, now!" Sam rapped out to Ezra. "There's two more of 'em somewheres—"

"Can't smoke 'em till I find 'em, can I?" Ezra snapped waspishly.

They jammed their broncs down the slope, ducking to avoid the snags. A gun crashed flatly, somewhere ahead, and Ezra grabbed his arm with a yelp.

"Dammit all, I told yuh to watch out," Sam roared.

"Ain't nothin'. Pine branch scratched me," Ezra tossed back. Yet it seemed only to make him madder.

Glimpsing a hazy figure through the dust raised by the moving cattle, they both fired that way. There was a yell, and the figure faded. A moment later they reached the edge of the drive.

"Make fer the point," Sam cried. "We'll turn 'em, an' chase these hombres at the same time!"

Exerting a steady pressure against the moving line, and firing into the ground, they gradually turned the column. Yells sounded faintly to the rear, but no more gunfire broke on their ears. Once started, turning the drive back was almost easy. Within ten minutes the stock was traveling back in the direction from which it had come, and it was running now.

A few last shots, and the partners drew aside to view their handiwork. After a time, they glimpsed at least three punchers, far ahead now, working madly to hold the steers together. They did not look back and soon faded from view.

"That'll keep 'em busy fer a while," averred Sam. "An'

give 'em somethin' to think about, too . . . What a gall, shovin' that herd onto our range thataway!"

"Wal, yuh winged one of 'em anyway," Ezra said gruffly. "He sure asked fer it, but I reckon he won't want no more."

Turning back, they were a little surprised at the distance their ride had taken them away from Lizard Ridge. The incident was not allowed to interfere with their work. Half an hour later they were serenely combing the breaks once more. It looked as if they might reach the lower valley not longer than an hour past midday, after all.

About to turn down out of the hills, they paused at a distant whistle shrilled on two fingers. Shading his eyes, Sam peered across the slopes.

"Three men yonder," he announced, pointing. "By gol, one of 'em is Buckner, too. What's he want?"

It was clear from the Crow Track foreman's imperious waving that he was trying to attract their attention.

"We better ride over there," Sam said uneasily.

Ezra gave him a contemptuous look. "Unh-uh," he vetoed flatly. "Let 'em ride. If they want us, we ain't runnin'."

Already the lanky, one-eyed man appeared to sense what might be coming. Pudgy, stubble-jawed and strangely cool, Sloan sat his saddle beside him while they waited. Five minutes later Polk Buckner came pounding up with two strangers in his wake.

The ramrod's craggy visage was red and determined. "What in hell do you two think you're doin'?" was his opening blast, scorn and condemnation all too plain in his thunderous scowl.

"Yuh mean that shootin'?" Sam's face was a mask of bland innocence. "Nothin' to worry about, Buckner. It's all over now—"

"You're damned right it is!" Polk's heady wrath mounted steadily. "But before yuh leave, you'll explain what the idea was—!"

"What yuh mean, leave? We ain't goin' nowheres." Sam was still stoutly noncommittal. "Ain't nothin' wrong with chasin' a strange herd off Crow Track range, I hope—"

Buckner appeared on the verge of an explosion. "Crow Track, nothin'!" he burst out harshly. "I don't need to ask yuh what yore game was! Bragg, here, told me the whole story!"

Sam cursorily examined the indicated man. "An' who's Bragg?" he grunted.

"I'm Hoyt's Rafter H foreman, Sloan—if that's yore name." Bragg was curt to the point of insult.

Sam's next words issued with silky smoothness. "Jest what was the condemned man's crime?" he inquired politely.

"Don't try to talk yore way out of it!" Buckner hammered at him. "Yuh was seen attackin' the Rafter H herd on their own ground—stampedin' 'em—foggin' the tallow off them steers for no reason! Yuh threw lead—an' even broke Ed Werner's arm! Whatever yore idea was, it don't go!"

"Hold on, Buckner," Ezra broke in with gruff calm. His gesture swept the whole west slope of Lizard Ridge. "I s'pose now you're tryin' to say yuh didn't tell us this is all Crow Track graze?"

Polk's quivering wattles grew redder. "That's a lie!" he roared. "I never told yuh any such thing! I ain't responsible for yore guesses! . . . Yore gall'd get you two fired, if nothin' else! Don't expect me to stand back of yuh if Bragg takes his charges to Jeb Crotty! I hope he does!"

Sam Sloan understood it all now. Pat had warned them against something of the kind. Sam's beady eyes narrowed.

"No need of goin' to all that trouble," he drawled. "We'll undertake to give yuh satisfaction here an' now, if that's what yuh want." He paused. "By the way, Buckner—I'm wonderin' if yuh explained to Bragg beforehand jest how yuh was riggin' this deal up as an excuse to fire us?"

This insidious broadside was not wholly without its intended effect. The Rafter H foreman glared sharply at Buckner. The suspicion of double betrayal hanging in the air precluded the likelihood of an immediate resort to arms, though Polk made a desperate effort to rise to the occasion.

"That settles it!" he bellowed. "You're no better than Brazos LaFors, an' playin' the same game—tryin' to push yore

damned troublemakin' to my face! . . . Get back to the ranch and roll yore beds! I'll give yuh yore time tonight."

Ezra started to push forward belligerently, but Sam blocked the move. "Okay, Buckner." He nodded curtly. "You're the boss."

In the midst of a heavy silence, he and Ezra turned their horses deliberately and singlefooted away in the direction of Crow Track headquarters.

While there could be no doubt as to the trick played on them, considerable difference of opinion on the matter developed between the partners during the course of that gloomy ride. They were still arguing heatedly when they came into the ranch yard. Mending a broken cinch-strap near the corrals, Pat Stevens glanced up at them fixedly.

"How come you're back here at this hour?" he called.

Sam spread his hands expressively. "Buckner's doin's. Crossed us up, an' then gave us the sack."

He and Ezra dismounted, crowding forward, and both talking volubly at once. Pat disgustedly commanded them to silence, but he had his troubles before getting a straight story of what had happened.

"It's plain as anything," Sam declared at the end. "I wanta go straight to old Dunk with this, an' have Buckner's lies shoved down his throat, but Ezra says—"

"No. We won't bother Pomerene," Pat ruled, his lean, bronzed face thoughtful. "For one thing, he's in no condition for arguments; and for another, I told you I expected this." His shrewd eye was appraising. "Don't tell me you're taken by surprise at this late date?"

"Then what'll we do?" Sam demanded plaintively.

"*Quién sabe?* It may be a good thing you've got your liberty," Pat mused. "If Buckner pays you off tonight, you've got a right to lay over. You can both ride with me tomorrow."

It worked out that way. Giving the partners their time that evening, the Crow Track ramrod refused to reopen the argument concerning their actions. His dour preoccupation

said that he was cogitating the problem of how to get rid of Pat Stevens next.

No disturbance marred the night. Pat learned from Fern that Pomerene's condition was no worse, and he concluded the rancher's recovery was only a matter of time. Ranse Morrill had not yet made his reappearance.

Pat and his friends rose before the ranch crew the following morning, gulped a hasty breakfast and pulled away from the ranch in first daylight.

"Where to?" Ezra queried.

"I want to look over the spot where you tangled with that Rafter H crowd," Pat said. "May have to ride in to Lost Trail later, for a talk with Hoyt. I'll see."

They made good time through the open pine forest. Sunrise found them in sight of Lizard Ridge. Indicating various points as they rode, Sam explained the previous day's activities, which Pat followed attentively.

Sight of the rich range beyond, once they had mounted the ridge, brought an exclamation from Stevens. He looked thoughtful.

"You git it, eh?" Sam glanced at him significantly. "Near's we can make out now, this is actually Rafter H range. But there was a mighty hungry look in Buckner's eyes when he was over here yesterday. Damn him, he's figgerin' right now how to grab all this rich grazin'!"

Pat's eyes changed as he gazed off through the scattered pines. When he failed to reply, Sam involuntarily followed the direction of his glance.

"What yuh lookin' at?" he asked.

"There's something over there in that pine crotch." Pat pointed. "Can't make it out from here, but whatever it is, it's been stowed away mighty careful."

They rode down there, peering upward.

"Dang queer," Ezra grunted, as they drew near. "It's an old hull, stuck up there—"

He got down and approached. A moment's effort sufficed to lower the object. Pat had dismounted also. With it lying

there on the ground between them, Ezra looked up, and for a moment their eyes met in puzzled questioning.

There could be no mistake. It was Pat's old saddle, the one unceremoniously lifted by Dale Marlin at the time of his departure from their camp on Wolf Creek.

10.

"QUEER PLACE fer a hull to be stashed away—even an old one," Sam said dubiously. "There's somethin' behind this."

They took their time having a look around, but could make nothing of it. There was not even a dead horse nearby to offer the usual cue to the answer.

"Wal, young Marlin had it last," said Ezra heavily. "Meb-by some of that Crow Track crowd caught up with him finally."

What he was suggesting did not escape them. "Can't be sure he *did* have the saddle last," grunted Sam.

"Don't reckon it could've been planted fer some reason, do yuh?" Ezra pursued shrewdly.

But Pat would not hazard a guess. "No point in leaving it here, at any rate." He swung astride, lifted the saddle up and rested it before him on the horn.

"Dang nuisance, luggin' that thing around," grumbled Sam. "Why not leave it, an' we'll pick it up later?"

For reasons of his own, Pat declined with a shake of the head. He pushed on, looking over the scene of yesterday's clash, ignoring the inconvenience of the bulky saddle.

None of them were prepared to see, half an hour later, a close-knit group of riders advancing silently and purpose-fully toward them through the pines. Pat counted five in the bunch. A gun or two glinted in the slanting early sunlight.

"Recognize 'em, Sam?" Pat murmured in a low voice. "This the Rafter H, ready to haze us off their range?"

Sloan shook his head. "None of the men we saw yesterday in this bunch. I dunno who 'tis—"

The men rode forward smartly, fanning out to face the trio in a watchful semicircle. Pat singled out their leader, a bony, lantern-jawed, beady-eyed young fellow with a headlong look of utter recklessness about him.

"Saddle stealin', eh?" rasped this individual, his mouth twisting up contemptuously. "By Gawd, this time we caught yuh at it!"

"Ain't lost none o' yores, have yuh?" Sam bristled, crowding forward.

"How d'you know?" was the spokesman's surly retort, hand hovering near his gun.

"Don't none of yuh look as if yuh owned more'n one apiece," Sam whipped back coolly. "S'pose yuh go on about yore business, then, an' we'll do the same."

"*Wait.*" The word cracked like a pistol shot. "Where'd you get that hull?"

It was insolent in its imperiousness. Pat had already ceased to think in terms of argument, watching for the first telltale move of these men and ready for the worst.

"We wear 'em out fast, an' carry an extra," growled Ezra satirically. "What's it to yuh, loudmouth?"

The lanky one eased his seat in the saddle cautiously. His long face had gone pasty, the black eyes blazing in contrast. He spoke blusteringly. "You'll get yore neck stretched. Don't hustle it, old boy."

There was indecision here, despite the lust for violence in these stolid, flat faces. Divining it, Ezra was recklessly willing to press the advantage, regardless of danger. "Dang yore mangy hide," he roared. "Mention hemp to me, an' I'll rope yuh off yore bronc!"

"All right—" The leader displayed a hardy coolness. His beefy hand swept up. "Take 'em, boys!"

Crack!

Before anyone could make a move, a rifle spoke from a

distance of thirty yards. Clipping a pine twig, the slug whined over the heads of the five at no great height. If it was a warning they heeded it scrupulously, freezing in painful tenseness. The leader's eyes bulged with rage.

Silence gave place to a soft thud of approaching hoofs. Pat was not surprised to see Dale Marlin emerge into the open, the rifle across his thighs trained and ready for instant use.

"Well, Marlin," Pat exclaimed. "Just in time! These hombres were ready to string us up for stealing your saddle."

Marlin never took his hard gaze off the renegades, raking them with smoldering scorn. "All for order an' justice, ain't yuh?" he lashed out bitterly. "I know yore breed, McCready! The gang yuh travel with don't look to be no better, either . . . I don't know how it got way out here; but I borrowed that saddle from Stevens, and it was goin' back to him!"

"Throw down that carbine, Marlin," McCready grated, hatred and prudence struggling in him. "I'll settle with you in short order!"

Marlin rode directly up to him, cowed by neither weight of numbers nor vaguely expressed threats. They sat there knee to knee, glaring implacably. Slowly the rifle slipped to the ground.

"All right, Mac," rapped Marlin, tersely. "What'll you do?"

Bellowing an oath, McCready went for his gun. Marlin was ready for him. Clamping the rising wrist with one hand, he whipped up his other fist. The single chopping stroke, striking McCready on the jaw, bashed him out of his seat like a sack of meal. He thudded heavily to the ground.

"There's thanks, if yuh want it," cried Marlin harshly, staring down. "A hell of a lot you care about my saddle!"

Stiffly arrested under the muzzle of Ezra's gun, McCready's confederates offered no slightest movement. In the pause which followed, Marlin leaned down to retrieve his rifle. Then contemptuously, with a blistering stare at them, he turned away.

Pat made no such mistake, narrowly surveying these four congested but inexpressive visages.

"All right," he ordered curtly. "Pick your man up and make tracks."

They moved stiffly, taking their time and being careful to ignore their weapons. McCready was picked up, jostled to partial consciousness, and propped on his pony. In dead silence the group turned and moved away, well aware they were being watched closely for the first false motion.

"Who are they, Marlin?" Pat turned to the young puncher. "Sam says there's no Rafter H men in that crowd."

"No." Marlin's expression was sober. "I'm not sure of 'em myself, Stevens. Yuh heard me call McCready by name—he's a puncher for Pomerene's Padlock spread, at Split-Rock Mesa, or was. Probably he ain't any longer, ridin' way down here."

"And the rest?"

"They may belong to a gang of horse thieves who travel through this range occasionally. Mac ain't improved himself any, ridin' with them. Seems to be sort of a strawboss, too—"

"I got that." Pat had placed his own significance on the fact. "You say he rode for Pomerene?"

"Yeah. At Split-Rock Mesa." Marlin started to explain about the northern ranch.

"I know." Pat held up a hand. "Let me turn this over for a minute."

He was silent so long that the others began to grow restless. Finally he spoke.

"Sam." He turned to the latter. "I want you and Ez to pitch camp at the wagon—you can take my saddle along, too. Make it near town. Drop in at the boardinghouse sometime today and talk to Chuck Hoyt, if he's able. Tell him the straight of what's going on out here—and pick up all you can."

"Sure," said Sam. "Where you goin'?"

"I'm taking a look at this Padlock ranch with Marlin, if he's willing. He knows that country."

Dale nodded, hiding his start of surprise. Yet obviously

he was eager to go. Ezra and Sam, however, accepted these proposals rather grumpily.

"When'll yuh be back?"

Pat shrugged impatiently. "When I get back. You two never depended on me to look after you—"

Sam grunted resignedly. "Go ahead. Have all the fun yoreself! I reckon we'll scrape by somehow."

Without more ado, Pat handed the heavy stock saddle over and swung away, Marlin at his side. Twenty minutes passed, and the disgruntled partners were out of sight to the rear, before either spoke. It was Marlin who finally broke silence, in an embarrassed manner.

"Find that money of yores yet, Stevens?"

Pat had been waiting for something of the kind. He did not turn to look at the other.

"No."

The silence returned—obviously a troubled one on Marlin's part.

"I've racked my brains for some way to prove to yuh I never saw that money," he blurted finally. "I know how bad it looks. I was there. I did trick Sloan out of camp—and I lifted yore saddle and breezed." He shook his head. "Of course, yuh know now that I *had* to push off that night, an' damn fast—"

"No, you didn't."

Marlin looked blank. "Didn't Sloan tell yuh that Crow Track was right on my tail?"

"They'd never taken you away from Sam."

Chagrin succeeded surprise in Marlin's face at this. "By Gawd, I believe you're right! But I didn't know that then. It's too late now. I laid myself wide-open, Stevens, and I don't know what to do about it."

Pat liked the young fellow's frankness, as he had liked everything else about him from the start.

"Maybe it ain't that bad," he said easily.

Marlin stared, caught. "No?"

"I've learned that at least one of the hombres fogging you that night had his head in the camp wagon for a min-

ute," Pat pursued. "That gave him the same chance at the money that you might've had. Sam had his eyes on him at the time, but *he* never knew the money was there. For that matter," Pat drawled, "he and Ez don't know yet that it's gone."

Marlin drew a long breath, as if a vista of hope had suddenly opened up before him. "It's mighty white of yuh to tell me that, anyway, Stevens," he burst out.

They had left the Rafter H range behind and were still on Crow Track land, which ran for miles in the direction they were taking. So engrossed were both in their talk that it came as a surprise when a faint cry reached their ears, and they turned back to observe a rider bearing down on them swiftly from the rear.

"Hi!"

A small brown hand was lifted as the newcomer hauled up, and if ever Pat had seen sunshine in Fern Pomerene's face, he saw it then. Pat noted that much, and slanted a quick glance at his companion. Marlin was equally surprised and glowing, if he succeeded in exerting greater control over his outward appearance.

"Howdy, Fern." He grinned boyishly.

"Where are you two sashaying off to?" she inquired. Obviously it had not displeased her at finding them together.

Marlin grew evasive, without seeming to notice it. "Ridin' north a piece," he returned, his glance lingering on her admiringly. "Sure wish I didn't have to, right now—"

Entirely aware of his approval, the girl smiled at Marlin, her golden pupils somehow reminding Pat of pansies. He might have wondered why he had never noticed this before, had he not understood how it was with these two. Something spontaneous leaped between them on meeting, without overt acknowledgment by either—a circumstance the more striking when Pat recalled the unfortunate note on which they had last parted.

"*Do* you have to?" she insisted, and her glowing regard included Pat.

"Reckon so. How's yore dad coming along?" Marlin shift-

ed the subject hurriedly, without immediately perceiving where he was headed.

The girl's piquant face turned grave. "He's better, Dale, thanks. He seems still troubled in mind. I wish you'd consent to make friends with him," she pursued wistfully.

Marlin struggled with himself briefly. "He don't need me," he got out uncomfortably.

"How do you know I don't?"

The puncher had never accustomed himself to these small surprises from her, unable to decide whether she sought deliberately to disconcert him. The thought that she was mischievously teasing was even worse.

Abruptly conscious of shabby clothes and uncut hair, Marlin flushed. "You'll never do that." His voice was almost hoarse. "It ain't like you to rub it in, Fern—"

The girl's rosy hue matched his own. Both seemed to have forgotten Pat Stevens' presence, engrossed in their unsolvable deadlock. If Marlin was stubborn, Fern was just as prettily determined.

"When will you stop running yourself down to me, Dale?" she asked softly.

"I'm beatin' the others to it," he burst out doggedly. "I know you're strong for yore dad. What do you think he'd make of it if I started chasin' yuh? What would that high an' mighty cousin of yores make of it?"

If his questions were unanswerable, Fern refused to accept them as such.

"Surely they would expect me to consult my own wishes," she said with quiet dignity.

Marlin was goaded to scornful laughter. "Oh, yes—sure. They'd encourage yore interest in a jobless, outcast pariah like me!" He broke off harshly. "Don't yuh know I've been chased an' cornered—dogged from pillar to post—hounded for days, till I'm about ready to do murder? . . . Do yuh believe me? What d'yuh think's the reason?"

Her slim face had gone pale, the golden eyes saddened. "It seems unbelievable. But you should be better able to answer that than I can, Dale—"

"Sure I can." He was biting his words off hotly. "It's because I incurred the enmity of Polk Buckner—that's why! That's high treason on this range, an' you know it as well as I do!"

"I don't know it," she returned with plucky self-control. "Furthermore, I doubt if you're right. You are making a great mistake, Dale."

He spread his hands wide in voiceless appeal.

"Did you ever try to tell Father your whole story?" she went on, with calm directness. "Have you ever faced Polk Buckner and demanded redress, apology, or an explanation? What do you suppose they think of a man who strikes and runs? You seem convinced that Father understands the cause of it all. Are you sure?"

Marlin looked stubbornly at the ground, humbled by her earnestness, but unmoved from his position. "Why bother so much about me?" he exclaimed in desperation. "I ain't worth it, Fern!"

"Are you certain, Dale?"

"Not to you, I ain't—"

It was the old rock on which he struck repeatedly, the disparity in their fortunes. Before it, all the former warmth of their pleasure in each other chilled and faded.

Fern turned quietly to Pat. "Did you think I had forgotten you, Pat?" she said. "I was willing that you should hear this—I understood quite well what it would be. I think you like Dale. Perhaps you'll talk to him."

Pat looked his thanks for her implied trust. "I'll do that, Fern, if occasion arises. But don't fret yourself about Marlin. I've no doubts he'll turn out to be quite a man." He paused. "You know I've interested myself in affairs on this range. Things are bound to change. I shouldn't be surprised if it works quite a change in Marlin as well."

The girl's face softened as she listened. "I believe you," she breathed.

"You'll talk to me, will yuh?" Marlin muttered obdurately, frowning at Pat. "What about?"

"It's obvious that you won't guess, Dale." She gave him a

clear look, by no means as unfathomable to Pat as it was to its recipient. "We seem never to avoid quarreling, do we? Well, I'm going. Will you be careful, please—for your own sake?"

Marlin only grunted. But his eyes followed like a needle drawn to a magnet as he watched her turn and ride away, erect and proud. His brows knit with uncertainty and concern; but if he seemed about to call after her, he mastered the impulse.

"There goes a fine girl, Marlin," Pat remarked quietly as they started on. "A man don't find two like her."

"Right. She's too good for me," Marlin murmured under his breath. But unconsciously his shoulders squared and he stared forward rebelliously, biting his lips.

11.

LATE THAT AFTERNOON Pat and Marlin rode into the little town of Bucktail, deep in the lonely hills. This place was even smaller and more primitive than Lost Trail, a sleepy backwoods hamlet. No one paid any marked attention when the two dropped into Bucktail's single beanery for a meal, and grain-fed their mounts at the only livery the town boasted, and they were soon on their way once more.

Pushing on through the early evening, Pat found opportunity to appreciate the wildness of this northern country. Canyons and heavily wooded ridges chopped it up, mountains hemmed it in. To the west soared a lofty spur tipped with rosy light, which Marlin called Uncompahgre Peak.

"Split-Rock Mesa's only another eighteen or twenty miles," the puncher added, pointing toward the peak.

"Smack in the middle of regular he-wolf country," Pat commented.

Marlin nodded. "Pomerene did hire a wolfer last year. An old rawhide named Gus Krumbine. Don't know but he's payin' him yet."

Pat's brows contracted. "In other words, we may not find ourselves alone up there, prowling the rocks—not to mention McCready's crowd."

"Yuh mean yuh don't even trust a wild-animal hunter?"

"Why should I?"

Twilight closed down over the desolate ranges in lonely majesty. When the light faded out of the west, Pat ordered a halt. They rolled in their blankets for a brief rest, the horses cropping sparse tufts of grass.

During the small hours the moon rose over the rocky heights. Rolling out, they saddled up and pushed on. It was cold now. They were in high country. Pat made out the craggy, silvered outline of Split-Rock Mesa, etching the deep blue night sky. Early dawn began to break, paling the moonlight, as they reached its base.

Broken, jumbled rocks and pine snags hampered their progress as they started to climb. The first bright rays of the sun found them topping out on the mesa's crest. A wilderness of piñon scrub stretched before them.

An hour later they came abruptly to the rim of a deep abyss gashing the lofty plateau. It was Rustler's Canyon, in which Pomerene's Padlock ranch lay. Pat dismounted and walked forward, his heels turning on the rubble underfoot. He could hardly believe his eyes. Half a mile wide, its wooded and grassy floor smiling beneath frowning cliff walls, the canyon stretched east and west beneath him. Miles long, a lazy creek winding over the bottoms, here was a natural, enclosed range such as many a cowman might deem close to heaven in more ways than one.

Marlin pointed out the cattle grazing near and far. "There's room for thousands of head in that hole, Stevens."

Pat agreed. "No man could ask for a better range—except for the long drive out to market," he added thoughtfully.

"Padlock drives north to the Gunnison Basin. Maybe forty

miles, with good water and grass . . . You can imagine what a fine thing the owlhoots made of this place!"

Pat assented. "Who runs it for Pomerene, Marlin?"

"Well, Ranse Morrill hangs out up here a lot. Likes the elk an' bear huntin' around Uncompahgre, I guess. But Ike Taggart is old Dunk's foreman."

"What kind of a hombre is Taggart?"

"Well, he's a crusty bird, not likely to give an inch—or tell anyone his business."

Pat thought it over. Finally he started to search along the rim, seeking a likely descent.

"Where you goin', Stevens? The ranch lays a mile or so below—"

"I want to go down here," Pat said. "The ranch can wait. It ain't that I'm interested in, anyway."

It took them an hour to make the rough descent, up which no steer could possibly have climbed. Piñon groves fringed the walls below. Without abandoning the abundant cover, they ascended the canyon for nearly a mile. Pat's interest in the fat M Bar steers they saw on every hand remained unflagging. M Bar was Pomerene's road brand, and so safe was the Rustler's Canyon range considered that few Padlock brands were to be seen anywhere.

"You mean Pomerene don't bother to brand the stuff he ranges in here?" Pat seemed to find a special significance in the circumstance.

"Only when he's ready to trail 'em out," Marlin explained.

Pat shook his head. "That's a temptation to wave in the face of any shady gent who happens along."

They pushed on. Though a careful watch was maintained up and down the sunny reaches, it was not surprising that no riders were observed. There was little need for a guard over the stock grazing in this close-walled canyon.

Pat halted when the stock began to thin out, and a wrinkle furrowed his brow. He had seen nothing whatever that might be considered suspicious. "What's the canyon like down below? Does it widen out? Is there a lot of range down there?"

"No—it narrows," Marlin said. "We've seen the best of it. Below the ranch, it pinches in to a rocky gateway."

Pat scratched his jaw, by no means wholly dissatisfied. Westward the canyon wound on, seemingly endless.

"We could go on a ways—"

"What for?" Marlin queried. "There ain't a thing wrong here that a man can see. You're barkin' up the wrong tree this time, Stevens."

Pat was not so sure. From the first he had sensed something mysterious about this isolated and little-known ranch, nor did its innocent appearance altogether allay his curiosity. Instinct told him to go on.

Around a bend, the canyon floor grew rough. Despite scattered spruce and piñon they kept to the high ground, now and again hearing startled steers crash away through the thick brush in the hollows. Pat insisted on taking a look at them all, though it was far from easy. At last he had his reward.

Marlin saw him peering through the obstructing branches at a steer which had not yet detected their presence. It was a brindled, beefy three-year-old, and it held Pat's attention so long that the other grew interested.

"What yuh lookin' at?"

"Take a look at the brand on that critter," murmured Pat. "If it's M Bar, I'm a Hottentot."

It wasn't, of course. The brand decorating the steer's shaggy flank was a Rafter H; and on the instant of seeing that, Pat knew that all his suspicions of this place were confirmed.

"Rafter H!" Marlin exclaimed incredulously. "It never drifted this far off its home range, that's sure!"

The steer browsed along, hard to see through the intervening scrub. Marlin craned forward to scan the earmark. Both were intent on the brute when a harsh voice spoke abruptly from a few feet behind them.

"What are yuh up to here?"

Whirling, Pat saw the scrawniest old man he had ever laid eyes on. The raggedness of his dress, however, detracted

nothing from the businesslike aspect of the rifle slanting in clawlike hands, its muzzle trained on the pair. Even in the shock of his relief that it was not McCready and his friends who faced them, Pat did not overlook the fact that this might yet prove a very tight squeeze.

"Howdy, Krumbine," Marlin said uneasily. "We never heard yuh come—"

"I said, what are yuh doin'?" the bearded old man demanded crustily.

"Looking around," Pat told him. "You're Pomerene's wolfer, aren't you? I'm working for him, too, Krumbine." He waved a hand. "We just spotted a Rafter H steer yonder that seems out of place."

Old Gus eyed them suspiciously and long. At last he snorted softly. "Lots o' them feeders down in here," he said gruffly.

"That right?" Pat was politely surprised. "I expect you could show us lots more—"

"Why sh'd I do that?"

Pat shrugged. "No reason, if you don't want to."

Krumbine weighed that. "Yuh swear you're jest lookin'?"

"What else would we be up to? Stevens is the name, Krumbine. Taggart will vouch for me—"

The long shot paid off. Gus' faded eyes were mere slits. "Yuh better turn out to be workin' fer ol' Dunk, mister—that's all." The slant of his Winchester relaxed, and he turned away. "Come on."

Pat's glance slid around to the rear in instinctive caution. This could be a ruse. Pomerene's wolf hunter had small reason to believe them, less to go out of his way to help. Yet he was doing so, leading straight off up the canyon.

Twenty minutes later Pat gazed downslope at a band of nearly two-score steers, cropping the rich mountain bluestem below. At his side, Marlin began to swear under his breath.

"Dammit, Stevens—half of them cows down there are Rafter H. An' there's a Circle R—a Rockin' K—another! Why, they're Lafe Kyle's beeves!"

"That what yuh wanted to see?"

Pat slanted a look at Krumbine. The wolfer had identified these steers by the innocuous designation of "feeders"—stock pastured for a few months on rich range by arrangement with the owners, with the aim of increasing their weight prior to marketing them. Probably they had been so described to him. Pat shrewdly guessed the old hunter paid scant heed to ranch affairs, seeing little and caring less. Whatever he might guess, he kept to himself.

"Mighty interesting, Krumbine. What rider's working this end of the canyon now?" Pat queried. "McCready, isn't it?"

Gus gestured indifferently. "There's an old cabin a half-mile above. Might be somebody up there." He did not appear to care much.

They turned that way. Pat noticed the old fellow was himself an adept at keeping under cover. A hunter ingrained, doubtless Krumbine had seen strange and unexplained things, as well, which had warned him to secretiveness.

The number of grazing steers increased as they advanced. Every one bore the brand of some spread in the Yellowhammers which had recently been rustled. To Pat the facts were damning, and his caution increased in direct ratio to the significance he found in it all. To be caught now, nosing around in this end of Rustler's Canyon, would mean death.

A whiff of smoke presently came to their nostrils, wafted downcanyon on the breeze. Mingled with it was a rank odor not to be mistaken. The smell of burning hide and hair!

A few minutes later, advancing carefully, they looked down the slope at a man busily engaged in a rough corral, working over the little branding fire whose smoke they had detected. Marlin stiffened suddenly.

"Yuh see who that is, Stevens?" he muttered tensely.

Pat nodded. At first glance he had recognized Brazos La-Fors. Lying low in this ideal hideout, the breed was earning his keep by working cattle for the rustlers—if indeed, he was not one of them himself.

Krumbine watched the scene inscrutably.

"Brazos shot a rancher from cover a few days ago in

Lost Trail," Pat told him curtly. "Marlin and I'll take him if we can. You can go or stay as you like, Krumbine. I'm merely telling you what to expect."

Gus' stolidity did not reveal what he felt about it. If Pat thought him in league with the renegades, his response was disappointing.

"Don't look fer no help from me," he grunted.

"Fair enough. Just don't make any mistakes, Krumbine, and we'll get along."

The bawl of a steer came up to them as Brazos applied the red-hot running iron. Pat glanced significantly at Marlin. Considerable open ground lay about the corral down there, but the breed was so busy that there was hope of working close to him before he became aware of his danger.

They dismounted and stole downward, taking advantage of the intervals during which the noise from below served to cover their movements. Now and again a pause fell, sunny and hot; and it was in the midst of this quiet that the crash of a falling rock shocked through them, coming from the point where the old wolfer had remained to watch.

Cursing silently, Pat looked up from where he crouched under a sage bush. Krumbine was nowhere in sight. Whether done by accident or design, however, the crashing of that dislodged stone was all the warning Brazos LaFors required. The man dropped his rope, swarmed over the corral gate and, catching up a carbine leaning against it, scuttled as fast as he could go for the tumbledown log shack atop a rocky rise a hundred yards away.

He took time to snatch the trailing reins of his horse, raking the surrounding slopes with wary watchfulness, and led it inside. The door slammed shut, and Brazos was gone from sight.

Breaking his immobility, Pat crawled down a protecting gully to the corral and had his look at the steers there. Because of the intervening rocky bulges, LaFors had only a partial view of the spot from the cabin. Pat took advantage of that fact.

"Overbranding—just as I thought," he grunted.

He was right. Instead of venting the old brand and tracing a fresh one alongside—standard practice in any legitimate cattle transaction involving a change of ownership—LaFors had laboriously tortured several Rafter H brands into a clumsy hourglass mark. Proof in full of nefarious activities!

Marlin took one comprehending glance, and turned away.

"Can we take that cabin?" he asked.

The spiteful crack of a rifle, its barrel thrust between the logs, answered him. They ducked hastily, scrambling for cover.

Pat glanced absently at his companion."Did he see you?"

"It was you he shot at." Marlin grinned.

"I don't think he made out much. Probably don't even know how many of us there are." Pat handed over his Winchester. "Give me as long as you can—ten minutes anyway—then start shucking lead into that shack. Wait once in a while, and make it good, Marlin. After an hour, go get your bronc and start riding away, trying to hide but showing yourself too—as if you were going for help. Got that?"

"Doped out a caper, eh?" Marlin nodded briskly. "Hope it works—"

"If it don't, LaFors better move fast," Pat returned grimly.

He turned away and ducked out of sight in the brush. It was rough going, and there were places where he had to crawl on hands and knees, but he succeeded in circling the cabin without drawing Brazos' fire. Suddenly Marlin's rifle began to slam. Creeping upward through jumbled rocks as he neared the shack, Pat heard the splinters fly as slugs probed the dry logs.

LaFors' weapon answered the attack, sounding from the side toward the corral, but not for an instant did Pat relax his guard. The gunfire paused, restarted, and fell off again. Pat crawled on. At the end of long effort, he lay half-crouched against a boulder ten feet from the cabin.

The silence stretched out, and he heard Brazos moving about inside. The breed was muttering to himself. The action of his rifle clattered, but no shot came. A few minutes after-

ward, a faint click and thud of galloping hoofs drifted from far away.

"What the hell—!"

Pat heard that muffled exclamation. Brazos had seen Marlin's hasty departure, as he was meant to, and was wondering what it portended. For long dragging minutes he did nothing at all. Had he been wary of a trick, as no doubt he was, he could not have been more deliberate. It was the way of his kind.

At long last the slab door scraped as LaFors pulled it partly open. Another wait ensued. Finally satisfied, Brazos banged the door back and stepped out, a pantherish readiness in his stride. He was anxious to see if his appearance outside the cabin would draw further fire.

Pat straightened from his crouch at the corner of the cabin and stepped into the open, directly behind LaFors.

"All right, Brazos," he said quietly.

LaFors' head jerked around, and he froze. His beady eyes bugged out. The muzzle of Pat's six-gun was trained on him at a distance of twenty feet.

"Damn yuh, Stevens!" he gritted. "I should've known it was you—"

"Drop the gun, Brazos. . . . That's right. Now unbuckle your belt. Step away from it. Turn around."

Pat's orders were crisp and definite, and they were as promptly obeyed. He tossed aside a knife the breed packed, made sure he had no other weapon, and stepped back.

Ten minutes later Marlin rode up. His eyes glinted at sight of Brazos LaFors, disarmed and captured. Clearly he had suffered of old at this man's hands.

Pat spoke from the side of his mouth. "Where's Krumbine?"

"He's gone."

"See McCready or the others?"

"No, I didn't." Marlin looked startled. "What about Brazos, here?"

"I told Crotty that LaFors was his. It still goes—"

"He'll never hold me on that fool shootin' charge!" Brazos burst out harshly.

"That's all right. You can explain this brand-changing to Jeb," Pat told him cheerfully. "It'll while away a few hours in jail anyway."

"You'll never get him down through the canyon," Marlin warned.

Pat smiled. "I don't think his friends will find out right away that he's gone." He paused. "Step in the cabin there, Marlin, and scrape out the marks of Brazos' horse. Gather up the empty shellcases he dropped, too. Then you can step down to the corral and pick up your own."

Marlin did as directed. "You're pretty sharp, Stevens," he commented, returning. "Now nobody'll know just what did happen here."

Pat shrugged. "We ain't out of this canyon yet. What about Krumbine? Will he try to stop us?"

"Gus may've rolled that rock to give Brazos an even break. Beyond that, I don't reckon he gives a whoop what happens to LaFors."

A glance at the breed informed Pat that Marlin had hit on the truth. His sullen eyes said that he could expect no help from that direction.

They tied LaFors in the saddle and set off, keeping a close watch. The smoothness with which things were going did not allay Pat's vigilance. On the contrary, he found the situation ominous, and they made time lest the sound of gunfire might unexpectedly bring the rest of the gang down on them.

No one molested them as they climbed the great wall and left Rustler's Canyon behind. Nor was the old wolfer to be seen again. But fifteen minutes later, Pat hauled in with a jerk. Marlin saw what had arrested him at the same time.

"Somebody comin'!" he exclaimed warningly, scanning the tiny figures bobbing this way through the scrub, as yet half a mile away. "It's McCready and his crowd!" His voice was tight. "What'll we do, Stevens? There ain't a scrap of cover up here!"

The wind-torn mesquite and piñon scrub clothing the mesa was not anywhere higher than a man's waist. Nothing else that might afford shelter broke the high level anywhere about.

Pat did not hesitate. He and Marlin dismounted and whipped LaFors' bonds off hurriedly.

"Throw the horses," Pat rapped out. "I don't think they spotted us; we're right in the sun. We'll stay here. It's our only chance."

In an open hollow the ponies were flung down. Marlin's proved fractious and strove to struggle up. There was a sharp tussle.

"Sit on his head," snapped Pat. He was crouched, with his gun in Brazos' ribs.

Marlin quieted the bronc and sat, mopping his sweaty face. So they waited, while the sounds of hoofs and careless conversation grew louder. Was it a trick? They dared not rise above the level of the brush for even a glimpse.

"One word, LaFors," Pat whispered tensely, "and you won't care who wins."

Brazos snarled, his sinister visage corded with the fierce impulses contending within him for mastery. But he was careful to make no noise.

McCready's band rode steadily closer and passed within fifty yards. Gradually the sounds of their going died out. Not for another ten minutes would Pat consent to so much as move, and then it was only to steal a cautious look.

He straightened up. "They're gone. Get the broncs on their feet. We're making tracks out of here fast!"

Traveling steadily, they dropped off the mesa and set a course that would avoid Bucktail by several miles. During a stop for water, Pat questioned LaFors at length concerning the rustled steers back in the canyon. The breed refused to talk. Pat gave over finally.

"No matter, Brazos," he said. "Crotty will deal with you. It's a long ride to the jail in Lost Trail, and there's plenty of time to be thinking it over."

It was noon of the following day, and they were hungry

and tired, their jaws dark with stubble, when they rode into town, their prisoner before them.

Jeb Crotty was just leaving his office when he caught sight of them. Turning back for his keys, he led the way to the jail in the cellar of a hardware establishment. LaFors was clapped into a cell, and the sheriff turned.

"Well, Stevens. Yuh kept yore word," he said with gruff approval. "Where was he?"

"We took a trip north to Pomerene's Padlock ranch. Brazos was hid in the canyon."

Crotty was watching him steadily. "In Rustler's Canyon, yuh say? . . . Now what?"

Not yet had Pat mentioned the rustled stock they had found at Split-Rock Mesa, nor did he do so now, although this omission mystified LaFors no less than it did Marlin.

"First we'll eat," Pat said. "Then it'll be Crow Track for mine. I've got some things to say to Pomerene that won't keep."

"Come back when you're able," Crotty said. "Yuh can help Chuck Hoyt frame a charge against this bushwhackin' breed."

Pat nodded. He and Marlin turned away.

"Do you reckon you'll need me?" queried the latter as they headed for a hash-house. "If yuh do, I'll go—" But he spoke with marked reluctance.

"Why should I need anybody?" Pat countered.

"Might need some backin', if you're aimin' to brace old Dunk for a showdown."

Pat knew he was thinking of the Crow Track crew. "If I do, I'll get it." His tone was curt. "I won't need you, Marlin. But stick around, and don't disappear again."

No more was said while they ate heartily to make up for their long abstinence. Half an hour later, straight in the saddle, his lean face alert as ever, Pat jogged out of town alone on the trail to Crow Track.

12.

NEARING Crow Track ranch under the big-trunked pines, Pat made up his mind about one thing. It was time for an understanding with Dunk Pomerene. He must be told a few blunt, unsavory facts; and this time he would have to talk. It did not escape Pat that up to the present the rancher had invariably resorted to evasion, either through vague generalities or by a showy pretense of indignation. It wouldn't work now.

From the beginning the man's attitude had been puzzling. That Pomerene was secretly and deeply worried there could be no doubt. Did he suspect things about the operation of his large interests that he was in no position to prove, or even admit?

Pat did not subscribe to the outright condemnation of Pomerene professed by Marlin, Lafe Kyle and others. That Dunk would hire a stock detective and turn him loose, was proof enough that range conditions alone held no terrors for him. Then what was the answer?

Surely a logical explanation lay buried somewhere in the hidden life of the man who ruled this range. From the first Pat had sought some means of bringing pressure to bear that would force secret motives into the open. This he believed he had found at last. When he faced Pomerene today, it would be time for both to lay their cards on the table.

The pines thinned as Pat reached the edge of the little valley in which Crow Track's home ranch lay. He got a glimpse of the buildings, dozing in the sun. A jackrabbit, scampering across his path, emphasized the quiet peace of

the place. And next moment, the muffled gunshot, slamming flatly on the afternoon hush, jerked him erect in a flash.

"That came from behind the house—or inside," he muttered tightly.

He was about to dismount hurriedly in the yard when a man came dashing around the corner of the house on foot. Pat's Colt swept out of the leather, hovering, before he recognized Lafe Kyle. Even then the severity of his features did not relax.

"Still at it, are you, Kyle?"

Lafe halted, uneasy of manner, his expression sullen. "What yuh mean, Stevens?" he growled.

"It was all I could do to keep you from blasting Pomerene, there in town. Now you're prowling around his ranch. I suppose you'll tell me you didn't fire that shot just now!"

"No." Lafe was stubbornly defiant, although he carried his Winchester in his grasp. "I didn't!"

Pat's mouth thinned. "Maybe Dunk took a whale at you. You were in an awful hurry—"

"Whoever it was, he didn't miss me by much. I heard the lead singin'." Kyle's tone said that he had had enough. "I'm gettin' outa here, an' doin' it pronto!"

"Hold on." Pat stayed him. "Where'd the shot come from anyhow?"

"Somewheres upstairs in the house." Still Kyle attempted to edge away. "C'mon, Stevens. This ain't healthy."

"How does it happen you're here at all, Kyle?" Pat pinned him down.

"Wal—I heard Pomerene was in a bad way, with no help handy." Lafe spoke doggedly. "But I ain't walkin' into nothin', Stevens. I got here, an' I was scoutin' the house when—bang. That was enough fer me!"

Pat studied him briefly. There seemed little reason to doubt Kyle's honesty. He bore no hangdog air such as the consciousness of guilt would confer. The slow conviction came over Pat that some event had taken place in the ranch house whose portent they could not even guess.

"All right. You're coming with me, Kyle. This way!" He started for the house on the run.

No one met him as he burst in at the door, with Lafe at his heels. A call elicited no response. Pat headed for the rustic stairway across the big living room and took the steps three at a bound.

Three doors stood open along the south side of the upper hall. From one drifted the faint bluish wisps of what could only be eddying gunsmoke. Pat sprang to the opening, gun in hand, and stopped short.

Whatever he had expected to see, the sight that met his eyes was the very last he would have believed possible. In the middle of the room, stooped and tense, stood Ezra, his single eye glaring under the bushy brow. Even in that flashing glimpse, Pat saw the six-gun in his big hand. At his feet, on the floor beside the bed, the blankets still half-wrapped about him, lay Dunk Pomerene in a limp, cramped pose which could spell only one thing.

"Oh. You, is it?" Ezra mumbled, in a tone of bewildered relief.

Pat said nothing. Face rocky, he stepped over the prone rancher and knelt beside him. There was no evidence of blood, perhaps because of the enfolding blankets; but a brief search for the pulse in Dunk's wrist, a lifting of one eyelid, told the story.

The rancher was dead.

Pat straightened. No twitch of the heavy look he gave Ezra revealed anything of the struggle that went on in him. His voice was flat. "You do this?"

Ezra rumbled in his throat. "Me? Hell, no!" He looked incensed, pointing at Kyle, who stood in the door. "I seen him prowlin' around, an' shot to scare him off."

Pat swallowed the gusty sigh of relief that lifted a great weight off his chest.

"What happened to Pomerene?"

Ezra shrugged. "'Nother of them strokes, or somethin'. He was in a stupor, purple in the face, an' breathin' like a steam engine. I was sittin' with him when he took a spell

an' flopped off the bed. Must've finished him, if yuh say he's gone."

Pat's gaze never left the lanky man's face. According to Ezra's version, old Dunk had simply suffered another of his seizures and died without regaining consciousness.

"Just what brought *you* here, Ez?" he asked quietly.

"Wal—" Ezra temporized, showing confusion.

"Never mind. You and Sam were still wrathy about losing your jobs. You couldn't let it alone, could you? You came to throw it into Pomerene and blow to him about Polk Buckner. That the way of it?"

"Mighta been," Ezra allowed grudgingly, showing annoyance at Pat's shrewdness. "What's the difference? I never got no chance, Stevens—an' it's too late now."

Pat nodded grimly. Neither of these men could be aware of how truly Ezra spoke. Pat saw his own plans gone glimmering in the face of this wholly unexpected turn of events. That all his work thus far had gone for nothing, however, he did not for an instant suppose. The altered situation simply required a speedy readjustment in his manner of attack.

He bent over the fallen cattleman. "Get hold of his feet," he told Ezra. "We'll put him back on the bed."

They lifted him up, and after covering all that was left of Pomerene with the blankets, Pat turned.

"Where's his daughter? Does she know about this yet?"

"She expected it anyway," Kyle spoke up. "I met her ridin' to town fer the doc—"

"Wasn't a soul here when I arrived," Ezra concurred. "Not even young Morrill. Wonder where he's at?"

"I saw him step into the saloon there in town, just as I left," Pat replied soberly. "If Fern's gone for Doc Dever, she'll probably bring Morrill out with her."

Meanwhile it was true that Fern Pomerene had found her cousin in Lost Trail, but her news did not have the effect on Ranse Morrill that Pat had predicted.

The two stood talking before the general store, where the girl had overtaken Morrill.

"You *must* come home with me, Ranse," she urged strongly. "Father's attacks are growing steadily worse. Your place is near him, if—if anything should happen," she concluded. "This time I'm afraid."

He waved the cigarette he was holding, negligently, pausing to flick ash from his jacket lapel.

"I thought you were in a hurry to hustle Doc Dever out there," was his easy response. "Go on. Don't wait for me, Fern. I'll be along—"

"Why can't you come with us?" she insisted.

"A little matter I must attend to," he evaded, frowning. "It may keep me for an hour or two. And stop your worrying, can't you? Uncle Dunk's had these spells in the past, and got over them." His manner made light of the present one.

"I don't believe Father's condition bothers you in the slightest," she accused, the tears suspiciously close to her eyes.

"No, it's not that." He was provoked now. "But there's more than a chance that his condition isn't as serious as you all suppose."

She knew what he meant. For months Pomerene had been trying to get Ranse to mend his heedless and spendthrift ways. Morrill rather suspected his uncle of attempting now to use his illness as a means of influence by exciting sympathy. Just as stubbornly, Ranse was refusing to rise to the bait.

"We'll look foolish, rushing around like mad, if there's really nothing wrong." He sounded superior. "Uncle Dunk won't thank us either, if he's all right tomorrow."

She turned away from him blindly, rushing in the direction of the doctor's office. Dever had a couple of rooms up over the closed assay office down the street.

Dale Marlin had been a witness to that meeting, leaning in the doorway of the livery barn. His face grew serious as he took note of the girl's actions. He could see that she was distracted, and it reached deeper into him than he would admit. He moved out to meet her at the foot of the outside stairs leading up to the doctor's rooms.

Never had he seen that small face whiter or more drawn. "Fern—what's wrong?"

"It's Father, Dale. I'm afraid he's terribly sick—"

"And you want Dever in a hurry," he finished for her, swiftly. "I don't think he's up there right now. Wait' 'n' I'll see."

He bounded up the steps, pounded on the door briskly, opened it and stepped in. A moment later he emerged, to come down shaking his head.

"He's out. There's the usual note—'Back in ten minutes.' That may mean two hours."

"Where can I look for him?" the girl exclaimed, so upset that she could scarcely think.

"Just hang on. I'll find him," he assured her. Now that there was a genuine need for him, Marlin was only too anxious to be of service. "Wait here. Or better, get Doc's horse saddled—at the livery. Charley'll do it for you. I'll locate Doc in a jiffy."

He hurried off, and for an instant she looked after him, her eyes warm. She went to the livery then and told old Charley what she wanted. The decrepit attendant hurried as much as he could, grumbling about Doc's worn-out saddle.

Marlin came striding out of the boardinghouse with Dever at his side as she was leading the medico's horse into the street. The latter moved forward, gravity stamped on his round face.

"Thank you, my dear." He hooked his satchel over the saddle horn and swung astride with difficulty. "Get your own horse, and we'll be off."

Marlin was already coming, leading Fern's pony as well as his own. Dever rode ahead of them as they mounted and struck out for the ranch. The doctor, told of Pomerene's plight of a few hours ago, had asked no questions and rode at a brisk canter. He knew what to expect.

Fern got herself in hand as they entered the pines. "Do you know what you are doing, Dale? This is the first time you've offered to go to the ranch in months, and without even waiting for me to ask."

Marlin was embarrassed. "There never was any question about what I'd do when I knew yuh needed help. It ain't my fault if that stuffed-shirt cousin of yores threw yuh down cold."

"You saw that?" Sadness touched her lips. "Ranse is angry with Father just now. He simply doesn't think . . . It's good of you to stand by me, Dale."

"There'll never come a time when I won't," he returned bluntly. "I hope Dunk gets over this spell, for your sake. I may be makin' a mistake in comin' with yuh at all; but if I run into trouble this time, he won't be to blame for it. I know that."

She brushed this talk aside with an appealing gesture, knowing only that she had a kindly spirit at her side when she most needed it.

They reached the ranch at last, to find Dever, Pat Stevens, and Sheriff Crotty, whom Ezra had summoned from town, talking in low tones on the porch. All the doctor's haste had dropped from him, and the girl noted the sheriff's presence with dread. She saw Lafe Kyle making for the pines.

"Are you going, Lafe?" she called. "What is it—what has happened?"

He would not stop. "I got to git home, ma'am. They'll tell yuh—"

Marlin helped her out of the saddle, and she faced the three men on the porch.

"Yes?" she managed in a steady voice. "You all look at me strangely. Is he—is Father—?"

"He's gone, Miss Fern," Jeb Crotty spoke up gruffly.

She rushed past them into the house, and no one offered to follow immediately.

"Let her have a minute with him," the doctor said. "There's nothing I can do—or any of us."

Pat looked at Marlin. "So you decided to come out, did you?"

The puncher flushed. "She was in trouble, Stevens. What could a man do?"

"That's right." Pat looked up at the clatter and movement of horses, sounding from the corrals. It was late afternoon, and the Crow Track crew was returning from its work on the range. "Better step inside, Marlin, and not make yourself conspicuous for a while."

Marlin looked ready to tangle with the entire crew if necessary, but after a moment he complied. The men moved into the sitting room, and Doc Dever presently went upstairs. The others went on talking, studiously avoiding the one topic which occupied them all. At last Marlin could stand it no longer.

"What's goin' to happen now, Stevens?" he burst out, with harsh feeling. "Fern had her dad to look after her before; but with only that damned bloodsucker Morrill—and Polk Buckner—"

Pat's swift gesture of warning silenced him. Turning, Marlin saw the girl descending the stairs slowly, her pale face tearless but dazed.

She walked up to them, looking at each one. "Somehow I'm more glad than ever that you are here, Pat," she told the latter. "Perhaps this was not wholly unexpected, but there are many problems to be faced." Unconsciously she put a hand on Marlin's arm. "I need you all."

"Don't worry yourself any more than you can help," Pat told her gently. "I'll see that Morrill is notified, and look after the details."

There came a thump at the door, and it burst open to admit Polk Buckner. The foreman was angrily muttering to himself.

"That dang Ezra is still hangin' around, after I fired him. Stevens, you're probably to blame for—" He halted, staring at them. "What is it? Has somethin' happened?"

"Father has passed away, Polk," Fern told him. "May I ask that no disturbance be made for the present?"

He might not have heard her, his glance suddenly caught as he glared at Marlin.

"Pomerene's gone, eh? . . . What are you doin' here, Mar-

lin?" Scorn and contempt gave an edge to the question, instant suspicion springing awake in him.

"It's all right," Pat put in quickly. "He's here with me, Buckner," he added, to smooth over an awkward moment.

It served only to switch Polk's umbrage to his own head, however. The foreman fastened a beady regard on Pat.

"So it's yore doin', is it?" His voice rose to an explosive finality. "That settles it! I'm in full charge here now, Stevens —an' you're done! Gather yore pards together, an' drag yore freight!"

13.

GIVEN his walking papers so summarily, Pat Stevens stared at Buckner with knit brows. Fern saw his broad shoulders unconsciously straighten. Spots of color burned in her own cheeks.

Sheriff Crotty's actions, in this tense moment of suspense, showed that he was not only a friend of Pomerene's, but something of a diplomat as well.

"Quit it, Polk," he interjected flatly, before anyone else could speak. "This is no time to start a ruckus, with Dunk still layin' upstairs."

He urged the foreman persuasively to one side, talking to him earnestly in a low tone. Buckner's scowl endured as he listened, but his imperious manner relaxed, giving way to uncertainty. After a few minutes' more talk, Crotty got him to the door and out.

"You'll overlook Polk's display of temper?" Fern said firmly. "There'll be no more of that, for I'll speak to him myself."

Pat's expressively spread hands said the matter was a thing of the past. But he did not forget. He had known he could

expect trouble with Buckner, nor was he persuaded that it had even now been wholly averted.

Not yet had he seriously canvassed the possibility that Buckner had any connection with the rustlers at Split-Rock Mesa. It was not impossible, and the foreman was manifestly in an unholy sweat to get rid of him at the first opportunity. There must be some reason for the man's bitter antagonism.

The Mexican cook put in an appearance, and food was silently placed on the table. Appetites were poor, however, and no one ate heartily; nor was much of anything said. An air of tense waiting hovered over Crow Track. It was tacitly understood that with its main prop kicked out from under the great ranch, more was sure to happen.

Concerned with his chief problem here, Pat got Jeb Crotty aside as soon as he decently could.

"What was it you said to Buckner that backed him down so quick?" he asked curiously.

The sheriff's brows went shaggy. "I said, 'I thought you told me yuh fired LaFors, Polk?' He seemed some surprised to learn where Brazos was picked up. I'll swear he didn't look guilty, though. He *may* not've sent Brazos to Rustler's Canyon to hole up. But for some reason, it made him more willin' to go slow."

"He'll stand watching." Pat nodded.

Crotty was not done with the subject yet. He paused perceptibly before continuing. "Reckon he can fire yuh, Stevens, an' make it stick?"

"If he'd been a party to my hiring, he might. But Pomerene took me on. I'll have to call a conference with Morrill and the girl before this is settled, much as I hate to bother her right now." Pat turned away. "I promised her I'd notify Morrill about his uncle. I'll get Ezra started for town."

However, he was saved that trouble. Whether Ranse had picked up a rumor of events or his conscience had stirred him to belated action, he came riding in just as Pat was talking to Ezra in the yard. Pat accosted him without delay.

"I suppose you've heard about Pomerene, Morrill?"

Ranse paused. He was not a good poker player. Those

raking eyes went wary in spite of himself. "What?" he said blankly. "I—heard he was pretty sick, Stevens. It's nothing worse, is it?"

"Pomerene died this afternoon, Morrill."

For an instant Ranse stood rocklike, and his thin chest seemed to swell. Beyond this, the sudden shock helped him to conceal whatever the news meant to him.

"Too bad," he got out in a husky tone. "I suppose it's hit Fern pretty hard. Where is she?"

Pat moved with him toward the house. Fern was in the living room when they entered.

"Sorry to bother you with this," Pat told her. "But now that Morrill is here, I'd like to talk with the two of you. We'd better make it tonight, too."

"If it's urgent, of course we must," she assented with a sigh. "I'll make it as soon as possible, Pat."

He was secretly pleased with the way she kept herself in hand, managing affairs with calm good sense, once the shock of her loss had subsided a little. By contrast, Morrill appeared bewildered and uncertain.

Doc Dever had left for town soon after supper, and Crotty had departed following his talk with Pat. The doctor had promised to dispatch the county coroner to Crow Track at once, and this man presently entered. Fern turned to discuss arrangements with him.

Morrill stood listening to them and his abstracted eye, roaming about the room, fell on Dale Marlin. The puncher was obviously uncomfortable in this handsomely appointed home, feeling himself largely out of place; yet he stubbornly stuck, seated unobtrusively in a corner, running his hatbrim round and round in rope-calloused hands. Ranse's glance chilled.

"What's that damned grubliner doing here at a time like this?" he muttered to Fern during a pause in the conversation, in a perfectly audible voice.

He succeeded in capturing the girl's attention completely. The flush that crawled into Marlin's brown cheeks at his

contemptuous reference, was no more resentful than the spots of angry color which sprang into hers.

"Dale is here as my guest, Ranse," she reproved sharply. "He was kind enough to help me when I needed it badly."

The brevity of her speech left no doubt as to her full meaning. Thus reminded of his own indifference to her urgent appeal in town that afternoon, Morrill shrugged, turning away impatiently.

Pat was smoking and talking in low tones with Ezra on the front porch, an hour later, when Morrill opened the door. "All right, Stevens, if it's so important," he called negligently.

If Ezra snorted over his supercilious manner, Pat said nothing, rising at once. He followed Morrill through the house to Pomerene's little ranch office, in one end of the rambling building. Stepping into the crowded cubbyhole of a room, containing three or four rickety chairs and smelling of saddle leather and stale cigar smoke, so lately had old Dunk inhabited it, Pat found Fern Pomerene seated behind the big roll-top desk. If it made her look too small for the responsibility for which it stood as a symbol, her glance was level and collected.

"Sit down, Pat." She smiled wearily, as Morrill accommodated himself with the most comfortable chair in the place. "Perhaps now we can give you the attention you deserve."

Hands between his knees, Pat sat for a long moment on the edge of his chair, staring into the flame of the lamp with meditative gravity.

"I don't want to rake you over the coals," he began finally. "I'll make it short . . . Ma'am, I'm satisfied it's these ragged range conditions that killed your father. He hired me as a range detective, with orders to clean up. Too late for his own good, as it turned out, but not too late for yours."

"I've felt the cloud hanging over Crow Track," she assented. "Thievery, hatred, fighting. Something must be done!"

"And I'm about ready to do it. But here's Buckner all set to fire me—and, ma'am, he ain't changed his mind!"

Fern looked at him attentively. "You've learned things, haven't you?" she said quickly. "Is it anything that concerns Polk?"

"I haven't settled that in my mind yet." Succinctly Pat related his discovery of rustled stock in the upper canyon at Split-Rock Mesa. Fern and Morrill listened in rigid silence. Then the girl gasped.

"But that is Ike Taggart's affair," she exclaimed. "He manages the Padlock ranch—"

"I know. But here's this." Pat told how he and Sheriff Crotty had sought Brazos LaFors at Crow Track after the shooting of Chuck Hoyt, only to have Polk Buckner swear he had discharged the man. "Maybe Brazos was fired, and maybe he wasn't," Pat concluded thinly. "Anyway, Marlin and I found him hiding out in Rustler's Canyon—and busy overbranding those rustled steers!"

A pause fell, in which Fern looked at Ranse Morrill, her eyes determined.

"Call Mr. Buckner in here, Ranse," she directed, with dangerous calm. "We'll see who's being discharged!"

Pat lifted a hand before Morrill could move.

"Wait," he cautioned. "You can't fire Buckner now, if that's your idea. That's exactly the reason I called for this talk."

Fern looked at him in consternation. "I can't?" she echoed unbelievingly.

"No, you can't—and it's no sure thing you ought to, either. I've nothing against Buckner that will hold water. He's stiff-necked, and thinks he's a hard dealer. But for all I can prove to the contrary, he may be on the level."

He made no mention of his various reasons for regarding Polk Buckner askance, some instinct warning him to guard his tongue before Morrill. If he could make his point now without saying too much, he was satisfied.

"I think I understand all that." Fern had her own obdurate streak. "Perhaps you'll explain your reason for saying I can't hire or fire the ranch help at will."

"An unsatisfactory hand or two might not matter," Pat

said. "But Buckner's in charge here. With your father gone, the estate will automatically be tied up by law for three months. Your only authority to make any important change must come through the courts. You'd need a court order to fire Buckner, and don't forget that he knows that."

Ranse Morrill sat forward, listening with painful attentiveness. Pat gave no sign that he noticed, but he was sure the information meant much to Morrill.

"But that's preposterous!" Fern ejaculated.

"Well, it don't tie your hands altogether," Pat hastened on. "Your interest as owners carries a certain weight. Either you or Ranse has the authority to instruct Buckner that I'm still employed, and I'll have to take the chance of developing evidence that he's guilty of anything. With that proven, of course, the law would remove him."

From the start of this conference, he had been waiting for Morrill to declare himself. Ranse did so at last with decision.

"I'm in favor of that move," he told the girl firmly. "I've suspected the conditions at Split-Rock Mesa for some time, and guessed a lot more. It's why I demanded the management of that ranch, so I could clean them up." He turned authoritatively. "I'll tell Polk myself that you're still working for Crow Track, Stevens!"

To Pat it sounded much like a strong bid for the establishment of confidence. He glanced at Morrill with politely raised brows, and it was Fern who spoke.

"You say you've known about the rustled stock being driven to Split-Rock Mesa, Ranse?" she questioned curtly.

"I won't say that." He made an expansive gesture. "I suspected something fishy, that's all. Looking back, I can see that Taggart never left me to myself at the ranch. And there were excuses for keeping me out of the upper canyon—usually something else that had to be seen to. Probably it was because I never actually *saw* anything wrong, that I began to wonder. It just happens that Stevens beat me to the proof."

If the failure to find anything incriminating seemed a strange reason for growing suspicious, Pat passed it by.

"You think there's no question that Taggart's mixed up in the crooked work, then?" he asked smoothly.

Morrill's expression was one of exasperation. "How else could it be? Surely you don't believe Taggart isn't aware of everything that goes on in that canyon?"

Pat was forced to admit his shrewdness. Satisfied himself as to Taggart's full implication, he had waited only to see what Morrill would say.

"If you guessed all this, Ranse," Fern went on levelly, "why didn't you tell Father?"

Morrill stared at her in disbelief. "You can't mean that?" His voice rose; those raking eyes were intent. "You've said yourself, a dozen times, that he had a heart condition. He needed peace of mind, and mustn't have any excitement! What effect do you think such a piece of news would have had on him?"

If his air of expostulation was assumed, it was acting of a superior order. Even the girl's expressed doubt of him seemed allayed by it, but she did not relinquish her point.

"I think a knowledge of the facts, no matter how black, would have been less of a strain to Father than the terrible pressure of uncertainty—"

"But I told you I *wasn't* sure!" Ranse exclaimed. "Had I been given authority there on the Padlock, I would have acted quickly enough. Without it, there wasn't a thing I could lay before Uncle Dunk!"

He thought of everything. Pat began to ask himself if a sharper brain lay behind Ranse Morrill's insignificant appearance than he had suspected.

"What is your status here, Morrill, with Pomerene gone—if it's right to ask?" he inserted shortly.

"Father always meant Ranse to share in the estate," Fern put in quickly. "I never asked what was in the will, but I suppose he will inherit the Padlock ranch. At least I don't question his right to speak on such matters as apply to it." She looked at Morrill. "What is your recommendation, Ranse?"

"Just what I said before." Her cousin's confidence visibly

expanded under this confirmation of authority. "Stevens seems to've done good work in tracking down these rustlers, even if it don't concern Crow Track. He should be given a free hand, and such help as he asks for."

It seemed forthright enough. Fern nodded, tapping a pencil thoughtfully on the desk.

"I'm glad you see it that way. Pat will stay in any event, and be given such support as he needs. Things will go much smoother if we all work together."

Pat looked at her hard, caught by her tone. Was she serving an ultimatum in her suave way? Throughout this interview he had been vaguely aware of undercurrents at play beneath the guarded reserve all these people had placed on their tongues, even when Dunk Pomerene was alive. It was even more pronounced now.

If Morrill found anything odd in her words, he failed to reveal it, jumping up almost eagerly. "All right, Stevens. I'll go with you right now and tell Buckner your job has been confirmed, in a manner that he'll understand. Is that satisfactory?"

Pat hesitated. "I'd rather do the talking myself—and wait till the next time Buckner takes the notion to fire me, at that," he demurred easily. "I don't want him to fly off the handle right now, and it wouldn't take much to make him."

"That's reasonable," Fern agreed. "We'll leave it at that."

Morrill gave over without argument, though he seemed somewhat crestfallen. Clearly he enjoyed a show of authority. Pat gathered, moreover, that when Buckner was the object of it, the other's zest was only the keener. He made a note to inquire into the clash of wills between the two men.

He and Morrill rose together and left the office. Fern followed more slowly. Stepping into the big living room, she looked about her with concern.

"Where's Dale?" she asked at once. "He was here a short while ago."

"No reason for Marlin to hang around," Ranse returned brusquely. "Maybe that occurred to him."

On the heels of the words, the deadened slam of a gun

sounded from outside in the yard. It was followed by another shot, more distant, and the harsh yells of aroused men. In the electric pause which followed, the girl's face went white.

"No. He isn't gone!" she whispered. "He knew what he was talking about after all! . . . The men have discovered he's here—and they've cornered him out there in the yard!"

She was right. The instant Pat learned that Marlin was gone from the house, he had guessed what it meant. From the moment Brazos LaFors had been turned over to the law, he had known how important it was to get back to Rustler's Canyon without delay. One obstacle after another had been thrown into his path, and this was the latest.

Gun in hand, he sprang to the door and, jerking it open, leaped out.

14.

EXCEPT FOR the dull glow of lights from the house windows, the star-shot night spread pitch-dark over the ranch yard. Hurrying down off the porch steps, Pat barged full tilt into a stocky, heavy-set man before he saw him. He clutched at the other's arms to keep from falling.

"Lay off, will yuh?" the fellow bellowed, struggling to release himself. "What in time is this, anyhow?"

Braced to tumble the other headlong in an instant, Pat arrested the move abruptly, with a grunt. It was Sam Sloan into whom he had stumbled.

"You, eh? What goes on out here?"

Sam shrugged loose. "Wal, yuh didn't come back like yuh said, and I knowed Ez was here. Finally I run into Lafe Kyle in town, an' he told me Pomerene kicked the bucket. So I rode out—"

"Where's Ez now?" Pat was probing the night keenly. No

more shots had sounded, but men were calling out, and the slap of running boots came from the shadowy maze of corrals and pens down the yard.

"Dunno," Sam said uneasily. "I seen Marlin through the front winder, an' called him out. We just started to talk, when all of a sudden he turned an' started to leg it away. Then a gun whanged, an' I ducked!"

"It wasn't you they shot at." Pat's tone was brief. "Crow Track is after Marlin."

"Sure. But with lead singin' by, I didn't stop to read the address on it!"

Pat said swiftly, "Ez must be around somewhere. Maybe Marlin's with him . . . Come on! We've got to break this up!"

More gunfire racketed as he spoke, coming from the direction of the barns. Orange-tongued muzzle blasts lanced the night, but the gloom was too thick to make out the running figures. Pat started that way.

"If Marlin's got a lick o' sense," Sam exclaimed, "he'll make fer the timber—"

"That's just where you're wrong," Pat tossed back. "If I know him, he's made up his mind he won't be driven off."

"That girl, huh?" Sam grunted.

There was no time for more talk as the distance between them widened.

"Hello, the barn!" Pat called. The dark bulk of the building loomed against the sky overhead. "Are you there, Marlin?"

Ominous silence greeted the query. Even the muffled thud of boots in the dust had died out. Pat judged that the aroused crew, upwards of a dozen Crow Track hands, were scattered about like retrievers hunting down an elusive quail. That some of them heard him where they crouched in the shadows near at hand, their guns ready, he did not doubt. Marlin himself must have gathered as much—a more than sufficient reason for his failure to answer. Hemmed in as he was, he could never have reached the pines had he wanted to.

"If you're there, Marlin, speak up!" Pat called clearly. "I'll get you out of this."

"Go on away, Stevens!" A harsh voice, tight with wrath, spoke from out of the darkness. "We don't want you—now, anyway. Leave well 'nough alone!"

"Step out here, Lackey!" Pat hurled back in a flash. "I want *you*. You're not too yellow, I hope?"

A six-gun crashed, the slug fluttering by Pat's head. Bull Lackey's laugh was hard. A Crow Track straw boss, with a reputation for toughness amidst a tough crew, he was not to be bluffed from his purpose.

"Save it, Stevens—if yuh can still hear," he rasped. "I'll talk business with yuh later!"

At that moment a disturbance arose behind the barn. Boots stamped once more, a harsh voice yelled imprecations, and gunfire tore the night.

"Marlin's on the run ag'in!" whipped out Sam.

Making for the barn's runway, which stood open and led through to the rear, Pat almost collided with a blocky form which loomed foursquare and refused to yield an inch, directly in his path.

"Lay off!" the husky voice roared. "Damn it all, this is stoppin' right here, or I'll run every man jack of yuh off the place!"

Pat halted in amazement. It was Polk Buckner who confronted him. The Crow Track ramrod spoke in an aroused tone which meant business.

"I don't love Marlin no more'n the rest of yuh," he bellowed explosively. "But if I can help it, yuh ain't shootin' him down like a locoed coyote! Yuh hear me?"

"Fair enough, Buckner," Pat rifled back. "Between us, we'll put a stop to this!"

Buckner recognized him with a growl. Before he could speak, pale light flashed on their faces in wavering rays, throwing great shadows against the barn. A man ran out from somewhere, risking lead from a dozen directions, to deposit a lighted lantern in the middle of the yard. Setting it down hastily on the beaten dust, he scuttled away. Pat identified the long shanks of Ezra, and silently applauded him. Now, at least, they could see what was going on.

Only a sudden diversion, however, prevented the lanky, one-eyed man from being cut down by the angry manhunters. From around the corner of the barn came a clatter of thumping and stumbling bodies, almost drowned out by the harsh outcry of impassioned voices.

Whirling that way, Pat and Buckner saw four or five men struggling in a tangle. Blows thudded, and groans of pain followed. Out of the melee suddenly emerged a running form, legging it desperately across the yard. A raking gunshot failed to halt the shadowy figure. An instant later, it dived into the door of a saddle shed.

"It's Marlin!" yelped Sloan. "If the fool gits pinned in that coop, he's a goner!"

Pat was ahead of him, racing across the open in long swift strides.

"It's Stevens, Marlin!" he cried, making for the shed into which the puncher had disappeared. "Don't shoot!"

Yells of wrath rang out about the yard. Several hasty shots thudded into the logs of the shed, narrowly missing Pat in their flight. A shotgun roared. Pat reached the door, plunged in and dropped.

"Here, Pat!" Marlin reached out and hauled him away from the door. "They'll never drag me out of here unless they burn the place! You crazy fool, why didn't yuh stay out of this?"

Pat rose to his feet and made sure of the action of his gun. "Why didn't you stay in the house, as you were told?" he retorted, ignoring the other's bitter anxiety.

Marlin got himself in hand. "Ain't that kind of late, now?" he countered, attempting a chuckle.

The firing had not ceased. A slug winged in through the door and thudded into the rear wall near them.

"Come out, Marlin!" a threatening voice shouted. "Make it fast, or we're comin' in after yuh!"

The thud of boots brought Marlin up taut, despite Pat's restraining grasp. A shadow fell at the door. Pat shot a look at his companion. His level tone was glassy.

"This is it," he gritted. "Come on, Marlin. We're going out there—"

Marlin burst out, "But dammit all—!"

With a hand fastened on the other's arm, Pat hauled him to the door.

"*I told yuh to lay off!*" Polk Buckner's bull voice roared across the yard.

At the door, Pat halted and looked out. Despite the lantern, the ranch yard remained shadowy. But he made out the wary Crow Track crew, walking in on the saddle shed like wolves stalking an elk. Gun in hand, Pat stepped outside.

"Stay where you are, boys," he murmured in the breathless quiet.

If they heard him, they did not heed the warning. With a long stride, Marlin ranged up beside Pat, his bronzed face alert and stony. He was game. Still the crew came on. Bull Lackey was in the lead, his beady eyes fastened on Stevens.

"One side, Stevens," he rumbled authoritatively. "This ain't yore affair—"

"Roll yore bed, Bull." Buckner's rough order came from the side, where the foreman stood out of the line of fire. "Get up yore bronc. You're done here!"

Fully conscious of the closing semicircle of determined men at his back, Lackey came on. Nor did he speak. He raised a beamlike arm and laid it against Pat's broad chest, exerting a steady pressure.

"Don't make no mistake, Stevens," he droned. "We're comin' after Marlin. If yuh get hurt, it's too bad!"

In the faint light, Pat's iron visage corded and darkened with fury. He stiffened without yielding an inch. Suddenly his fist whipped out. It struck Lackey's beefy jaw with an audible smack.

The strawboss staggered back, shaking his head groggily. Pat never gave him a chance to gather his scattered wits. With a lunge, he struck again. Bull's head snapped back and he went down like a log.

Following this out of the corner of his eye, Marlin men-

aced Lackey's snarling cohorts with his level gunbarrel. The grimly set faces said they were set for a rush.

"Stand back, there!" Pat's warning slapped at them gratingly. "I'll drill the first hombre that tries to crowd Marlin!"

"That's right—break it up," Sam Sloan spoke from behind them. Pat was aware of Ezra, on the other side of Marlin. It was four against more than twice that number; the issue, clear-cut and by no means settled. Pat stood with his head thrust forward, shrewdly gauging the temper of the buffaloed crew, his bleak eye darting among them. But it was Buckner who spoke.

"Yuh heard him! He said break it up!" he yelled, stalking forward. "Marlin ain't yore meat. Git, before I fire the lot of yuh!"

"You ain't firin' us!" "Leave us be, Polk!" "Give us Marlin an' we'll quit!" the angry exclamations arose.

The sudden outbreak of argument, hot and wordy, told Pat that the crisis was past. Not the least curious factor in its accomplishment he found to be Polk Buckner's part in the affair. Buckner was still in a belligerent mood. Facing these hard-bitten men whom perhaps no man could wholly command, Polk waved his arm imperiously.

"Clear out, I said!"

Bull Lackey was picked up and toted away to the bunkhouse.

Marlin turned to Pat with a tight grin. "Much obliged, Stevens," he muttered. "I ain't foolin' myself none about what I owe yuh this time!"

Pat shrugged. "Buckner would have pulled you through, Marlin, little as he likes you. I don't know whether to be surprised or not—"

He turned as Ranse Morrill came hurrying down the yard, making a blustering, if belated, show of authority. "What kind of work is this?" His words rang out to the retreating crew. "Forcing your fights right here under our noses! . . . You fellows can consider yourselves lucky if you're not all given your time!"

Sam snorted softly for Pat's benefit. "Talks big—but I no-

tice he got here kinda late," he muttered scornfully. "He made sure he wasn't around while the shootin' was goin' on!"

Most of the Crow Track men had drifted away, following Lackey's downfall. The two or three remaining stared at Morrill in mute defiance for a time, but at length moved off in silence.

Ranse peered at Marlin anxiously. "You're not hurt?" he demanded and added after a pause, "Understand me, Marlin. I think you deserved a roughing up! It was asking for it to come here, and you know it. But we can't let you be shot down right here in our own yard—"

"No—and what's more, he won't run the chance a second time," Buckner broke in with hard finality. He whirled on Pat. "You hombres've all grabbed at Dunk's dying as an excuse to come flockin' around. Damned if I know what you're after, but you're out of luck anyhow. I told you before, Stevens, and this time I'm makin' it stick. Get yore pals together and drift!"

Pat shook his head, smiling slightly. "Too late, Buckner," he drawled. "I know you'd like to be rid of me, but it's out of your hands now."

Polk glowered. "How so, Stevens?" he demanded suspiciously. Ready for open defiance, he would have known how to meet that; but Pat's cool stubbornness puzzled him.

"I called a conference with the owners. Miss Pomerene, and Morrill here, have agreed to retain me for the present. Ranse will tell you that's so—"

Polk's contemptuous look disposed of Morrill as of small account. "Goin' around behind my back, are yuh?" he snorted softly. "There's just a chance you're tellin' the truth. I'll have my try at persuadin' Fern that she's dead wrong."

"That's okay with me." Pat nodded curtly. "Let's get it over with right now."

He moved beside Buckner as the angry foreman headed for the house, and Morrill followed more slowly. The girl met them on the porch.

"Is Dale all right?" she exclaimed, trying to keep anxiety out of her voice.

"Yes. He's with Ezra and Sam," Pat assured her. "It's all over, ma'am, and no need to worry—"

Fern looked up at Buckner and scanned his dour features. "What have you to say, Polk?"

"I'm handin' in my resignation," he told her bluntly, his breathing audible.

Fern's eyes widened. "And I refuse to accept it," she retorted as promptly. "Whatever put that notion into your head?" She succeeded in instilling wonder in her tone, though she must have guessed his reason accurately enough.

Polk shook his grizzled thatch stubbornly. "You'll have to," he declared flatly. "You've took my job away anyway, tellin' Stevens he stays after I ordered him to leave. That settles it with me—"

"Do you still insist on being the boss, Polk, when it's been demonstrated that you can't control your own men?" she inquired penetratingly.

"No—that ain't the case," Pat put in diplomatically. "It wasn't Buckner's fault the crew jumped Marlin. He stopped 'em dead in their tracks, too . . . Buckner's trouble," he proceeded calmly, "is that he thinks his loyalty to Dunk came to an end with Pomerene's death."

"No such thing," Polk growled. But he moved his feet uncomfortably, his heavy face expressing uncertainty.

"Let me say it all," Pat commanded. "You argued regularly with Pomerene, Buckner. No use pretending you saw eye to eye. But there never was a time when you weren't ready to go to hell for Dunk!"

Polk's shifting glance attested the accuracy of this claim.

"Pomerene hired me," Pat went on. "And you thought he was going over your head. The truth is, I've needed your help as much as you need mine."

"Bosh!" Buckner flung out a violent hand. "I'll never need yore help!"

Pat turned polite. "No? Then maybe you haven't heard that Rafter H is planning a raid on Crow Track right now—

in spite of your hobnobbing with Hoyt's ramrod. You don't know I broke up a scheme to set that off by accidentally finding a planted saddle on Rafter H range before Hoyt's men found it—and the track of a bunch of rustled steers!"

He was shooting in the dark now, but the narrowing of Buckner's eyes said he had started a train of thought.

"Another of yore wild guesses!" the foreman ejaculated scornfully. But his tone was forced.

"Don't fool yourself! I've made it my business to learn plenty of things you don't appear to know. Your job," Pat told him, "is to keep that crew in line and run the ranch. That seems simple enough. If you don't aim to throw Pomerene's girl down when the going is tough, I'd suggest you get back to your work."

"I ain't throwin' her down!" Polk burst out harshly. It was plain the suggestion aroused all the deep-seated protest of which his flinty nature was capable. Moreover, he had fallen a victim to the conviction that Pat was right. He had been Pomerene's right-hand man for years. Without Crow Track, he was nothing.

"Aren't you? Dunk's daughter is no different from Dunk himself." Pat drove the lesson home. "You know what he wanted for her. . . . What's the answer, Buckner?"

Polk's defeat was revealed in his sudden loss of belligerence. Suspecting Stevens of juggling words to his disadvantage, he failed to see precisely how it was done. Resentment would not allow him to relax the sullen guard he had thrown up.

"I'll think it over," he muttered, turning on his heel. "Nobody can say I left Crow Track in the lurch, or Dunk either—dead or alive!" On the point of departure, he paused to eye Pat arrestingly. "What about you, Stevens? You're dishin' out plenty of orders. Yuh better be worth yore salt from here out, or I won't answer fer how long *you'll* last!"

"All right, Buckner," Ranse Morrill put in with unexpected asperity. "We'll do the deciding about that! Uncle Dunk told you not to concern yourself about Stevens, and that still goes."

Polk jerked erect, his face suddenly choleric. It was with an effort that he controlled himself, and then it was not wholly successful. "*We'll* decide, will we? . . . You trouble-makin' squirt!" he snorted. "A little more o' you, and I will be explainin' to Dunk how come I couldn't take it no longer!"

He threw the last of this over his shoulder, and there was more of the same kind as he moved off, less distinct to the ear, in the midst of which Pat Stevens caught something that sounded like "too dang many bosses."

"What was that, Buckner?" he called after.

Polk did not pause to elucidate, stalking off down the yard, his back stiff with opposition; but the new direction which Pat's thoughts had suddenly taken caused him to stare after the foreman speculatively long after the other was gone from sight.

15.

BEFORE DAWN the following morning, Pat was abroad and riding the quiet trails threading Crow Track's pine-clad hills. The brightening sky was garnished with curling pink clouds; but if he glanced up occasionally, breathing deep, he was not idling. It interested him to learn what clandestine range activities might follow last night's outbreak, if any.

He was not unduly surprised to run unexpectedly into Ranse Morrill, already a mile from the ranch and heading away at a brisk canter. Pat pulled into the trail as if unintentionally blocking the other man's path.

"Howdy, Morrill,' he greeted the other casually. "Nice morning for an early ride."

Morrill mastered his slight confusion at this unforeseen encounter. His scrutiny touched Pat in a glance he strove to make casual in his turn.

"It is. I'm taking advantage of it for a little errand." He nodded cursorily. He turned his pony out to go round, and it seemed to incense him that Pat's restive mount backed, at the same moment, in such a manner as to continue to block his way.

"Going to Lost Trail, eh?" Pat went on smoothly, his words not so much a question as an acceptance of this supposition. The fact that Morrill had not been headed for town or that this was not a trail which led there even by a roundabout course, Pat managed to ignore completely. "It happens I've got a chore there myself. I'll ride along."

"I'm not going to town," Ranse broke out, with hurried sharpness. "Let me by, will you, Stevens? I haven't a lot of time to throw away—"

"Not going to town?" Pat echoed with deceptive innocence. "Better let it go then, Morrill. The funeral's set for this morning. If you try to go farther you'll never make it back in time."

Ranse had himself under control now and was regarding Pat with watchful calm. It was a moment before he spoke. "You're probably right, at that," he said, with the air of conceding a point. "Rather difficult to explain, if I *should* be late, eh?"

His haste seemed to have dropped from him completely. Without further comment he turned his horse back.

"If it's important, maybe Sam or Ezra could be persuaded to carry a message for you," Pat artlessly insisted. "I can soon find out—"

"No—let it go." Morrill showed faint irritation now. "As you say, nothing must stand in the way of this last opportunity to pay my respects to my uncle."

Pat had not said anything of the kind, but he let that go too. Their talk touched on minor topics as they rode back to the ranch. Morrill's aplomb, completely restored, showed him to be more than customarily affable. He seemed to have forgotten the manner of their meeting; but small as the incident was, Pat found in it food for reflection.

Already people were gathering from far and wide for

Pomerene's funeral. Stockmen, business figures, and officials from as far away as Durango had put in an appearance. Sheriff Crotty and a few other men who had known Dunk for years were present. It was not a time for the pursuit of personal concerns, and Pat noted with approval that for the present at least Polk Buckner held the Crow Track crew in full control. Young Marlin, still stubbornly remaining at the ranch, did not get far away from Sam and Ezra. Pat had warned the pair not to leave him alone for an instant.

Pomerene was interred beside his wife, on a knoll not far from the ranch house. Some low-voiced talk among stalwart, broadcloth-clad men followed the simple services, then people began to drift away, returning once more to mundane affairs as one buckboard after another whirled out of the yard.

Fern Pomerene, pale but composed, sought out Pat where he talked with other range men in the sunny yard, and led him aside.

"I know I should not bother myself with such things just now," she said. "But all night your words have remained in my mind. Just what was it you said to Polk about Rafter H raiding us, Pat? I simply can't believe it—yet not one of Chuck Hoyt's men was here at the funeral. If what you said is true, matters have grown worse than ever."

"That was said mainly to impress Buckner." Pat smiled. "There was some truth in it, but you can forget it now."

"But if it's true, I don't see how—"

"I promised your father results when I was hired," Pat reminded her. "I think I can safely give you even greater hopes. Right now, Rafter H is wrathy about stolen stock. When I send word to them where that stock can be found," he proceeded, "they'll forget all about Crow Track. The same thing goes for all the other outfits that are on the prod."

"But—you'll lead them to Split-Rock Mesa. Won't that involve us more deeply still?"

His face was inscrutable. "It'll involve the guilty men. They've got to be smoked out, and they will be. I don't know any other way to bring peace to this range."

He was unprepared for the change that came over her face. She seemed weighed down by more than her recent loss. Yet her courage was unshaken. "Is that—what Father instructed you to do?" she faltered.

"That's right. I was to go about this in my own way. I took it you understood that, when you and Morrill confirmed my job. Are you suggesting any change in those orders?"

Her pause was perceptible. Then her brown head came up, and the golden eyes were game. "No, you have an entirely free hand. You must use your own judgment, Pat . . . How soon must you leave?"

"Just as soon as we can get started. The ranchers involved must be notified—they didn't show up here today—and Jeb Crotty will have to be included, of course."

"Will it be safe for Dale to remain here at the ranch?" She brought this out reluctantly.

"I don't think anything could keep him here, right now," he returned frankly. "In fact, I don't quite gather what brought him here at all. He seems uncomfortable every minute. Have you noticed that?"

She understood perfectly that his deliberate words were intended to probe her feeling toward Marlin. Nor did any slightest intention to evade color her reply. "Of course I've noticed. I understand it perfectly. It's money that stands between us, Pat."

"It shouldn't," he retorted bluntly, pleased by her candor.

"Not in my mind—but in Dale's," she corrected him. "You've seen how he resents Crow Track's power. Yet it awes him too. He constantly defers to me, reasons with me—as Dunk Pomerene's daughter and heir, I suppose." She glanced away sadly, without self-consciousness. "I would respect Dale more if he would put his foot down firmly, at least once in a while."

"But not always, you mean?" Pat caught her up.

Fern colored prettily. She seemed to be done with the subject, as far as personal admissions were concerned. "I suppose you're waiting to get started? Come back when you can, Pat. And please be careful."

Pat turned away, gesturing to attract the attention of Sam and Ezra. They joined him at once, alertness under their casual manner. Marlin strolled up to the little group, his shifting glances divided between the Crow Track crew, turning at last to the day's work, and the spot where Fern stood talking with the minister.

"Get up your broncs, you two," Pat told the partners. "There's work, and you're elected." He named four or five small ranches scattered about the Yellowhammers, whose brands he had noted among the rustled stock in Rustler's Canyon.

"Between you, you'll have to cover those outfits in a few hours. Tell the owners to gather at Crotty's office in town, and bring any men they've got."

"Yuh mean we're goin' after their steers?" Ezra queried. "They'll git 'em all back?"

"That's the idea—if we move fast enough."

"What about me, Stevens?" Marlin spoke up as the partners started away for their horses. "I'd get a lot of satisfaction out of runnin' that kind of an errand!"

"No—" Pat paused momentarily, thinking. "You can pull away, Marlin—that's probably best, for appearance' sake. But I don't want you to leave the place."

"You're thinkin' of Fern?" the puncher asked swiftly.

"Not at all. She's safe enough. What I want," Pat said, lowering his voice, "is for you to keep an eye on Morrill. If he leaves Crow Track I want to know it—along with a general idea of where he heads. Will you do that?"

Obviously puzzled, Marlin nodded a delayed assent. "I suppose you know what you're about," he grumbled dubiously, seeming to believe himself willfully left out of more important activities.

"I think I do." Pat smiled. "If I'm wrong, there's no harm done. I don't want you to interfere with Morrill in any way. You can catch up with the rest of us in town, before dark."

Sam and Ezra had already pulled out, under the watchful gaze of Polk Buckner. Pat and Marlin saddled up, and after a last word with Fern at the edge of the porch, with

Ranse Morrill listening in apparent indifference, the two jogged away on the trail to town.

Beyond sight of the ranch, Marlin reined aside and disappeared through the pines with a wave of the hand. Pat rode on. Arriving in Lost Trail, he found the little town somnolent as ever. Sheriff Crotty had arrived not long ahead of Pat, and they met in the street.

"I've taken the liberty of calling a meeting at your office for this afternoon, Crotty," Pat informed the other.

"So?" the sheriff nodded woodenly. "What about?"

"Just a few ranchers and stockmen," Pat explained easily. "I've some things to say to you at the same time. Hope you don't mind—"

Crotty digested this without comment. They had their drink at the saloon and strolled down to the lawman's office.

"Well," said Pat reflectively as they sat down. "So Pomerene's gone. Always sudden, these things."

"Ye-es." Crotty pinched his pursed lip. "It'll make a difference, too. Dunk was the big augur round here—by rep, anyway."

"Sounds as if you doubted it." Pat smiled.

"Pomerene was ailin'," Jeb insisted doggedly. "It's no secret he was losin' his grip. I doubt if he even knew what was really goin' on."

It was a different story from the one Crotty had had to tell before. The Crow Track owner's demise made a difference in his attitude, as Pat had shrewdly divined it would.

"What about all this range leasing it's claimed Pomerene was forcing?" he asked.

"He took up any lease that offered, of course. Polk Buckner always rode him hard for more range. But Dunk was never guilty of the barefaced grabbin' he was accused of."

"Buckner crowded him, I know," Pat conceded. "What about Pomerene's Padlock ranch, Crotty? Did he have any idea of what goes on up there?"

The sheriff's hand, exploring his ear absently, suddenly arrested. "What's behind that question, Stevens?"

Pat spread his hands. "I might's well tell you now." He gave an exact account of his discoveries at Split-Rock Mesa, including the overbranding; naming the amounts of rustled cattle as closely as possible and describing the adventure atop the mesa on the way back to town.

Crotty rose, his manner brusque. "McCready and LaFors, eh? That's two of 'em. Who's the rest?"

"We'll find out." Pat explained his reason for calling a gathering of the ranchers. "But Brazos would know—"

Jeb started for the door. "And he'll tell—or I'll kick it out of him. Come on!"

The jail, in default of a better location, was situated in the basement of Hafey's hardware establishment. Two small rooms at the back had been bricked up into cells, with iron gratings high in the wall for air and light; a dismal hole at best. Crotty led the way into the place. It was dusky here, and they could not see much through the bars.

"LaFors," Crotty called gruffly, rattling the cell door.

There was no answer. Grunting to himself, the sheriff jingled his keys, preparing to open the grating and yank the man out. Pat peered in past his shoulder, suddenly intent.

"Is this the cell you put Brazos in?" he asked sharply. "There's nobody in there now, Crotty!"

Jeb stared. Swiftly he unlocked the door and flung it back, and they crowded in. The cell was indeed empty. Nor was there any place where a man could hide.

They saw at once what had happened. The iron grating closing the small, high window had been wrenched loose and shoved aside, and the prisoner had crawled to freedom.

"Pried out with a crowbar, from the outside," Crotty snorted wrathfully. "Done durin' the funeral, likely. Brazos was here at breakfast time."

Lafe Kyle barged in through the door while they were examining the damage. "Here yuh are!" he exclaimed. "The boys're lookin' for yuh—"

"Let's go, Crotty," said Pat crisply. "No time to bother with this now. LaFors is gone, and he's on his way to carry a warning. If we move fast, we may overtake him!"

They hurried to the street and found Sam Sloan before the sheriff's office. Four men were with him. Bragg, the Rafter H foreman, was among them.

"What's this all about, Crotty?" another demanded. Pat noted the Circle R brand on his pony.

Jeb outlined the situation with hard efficiency. "Stevens, here, has located some of your stolen stock, Rankin, as well as some Rafter H stuff. Others are interested too, an' soon as the boys git here, we'll shove off."

Questions flew thick and fast, but Crotty waved them aside. "Plenty of time for that while we're ridin'. Get cartridges an' grub—an' make it fast!"

Ezra rode in a few minutes later. He had picked up three men. None wasted any time, and they were soon ready to ride.

They were heading out of town when a gruff hail caught Pat's ear. He glanced over to see Polk Buckner standing on the saloon porch. The Crow Track foreman did not know what to make of this bleak-faced band of heavily armed men, riding away with Pat Stevens and Sheriff Crotty at their head. A thunderous scowl darkened his face.

"What's this all about, Stevens?" he called to Pat.

"No time to explain now, Buckner," the latter tossed back shortly. "You'll hear about it—"

But Polk was not letting it go at that. In a gust of impetuosity, he sprang to the hitch rail, swung aboard his bronc, and, kicking it into motion, cantered up alongside Pat and the sheriff.

"You're up to some game," he declared flatly. "I got the same right as any stockman on this range to declare myself in. What is it?"

"Rustlers," Pat bit off.

"Hell, I got that much!" Polk said violently. "If yuh mean yuh learned somethin' definite, I ain't takin' no brushoff about it, neither!"

The other ranchers glared at him uncompromisingly. There was not one of them but held some grievance against the powerful Crow Track in general and Buckner himself in

particular. They did not welcome his riding with them now.

"Lay off, Buckner," Rankin hurled at him angrily. "We don't need you. This is our job, an' we're doin' it!"

"Better turn back, Buckner," Lafe Kyle seconded, his tone forbidding. "Ride with us, an' you're liable to see some things yuh won't like. This time we don't aim to be stopped!"

Polk hung on with stubborn defiance. Hard, lonely, self-contained spirit that he was, he asked for no man's approval so long as he had his own. "That's enough," he ruled them down rigidly. "You're after the stock thieves eatin' into this range. I dunno who it is, but I'm ridin' with yuh. I don't give a damn if it turns out to be the devil himself!"

There was grumbling, but they recognized his indomitable will and vouchsafed him a grudging respect. Grim silence fell as they took up the long trail at a brisk pace, their faces set to the fore. One man looked back, a frown furrowing his brows. It was Pat Stevens. Two things dragged his thoughts uneasily rearward, one being the inexplicable fact that Dale Marlin had failed to put in an appearance.

And the other—which no one but himself had noted—was that Brazos LaFors had been able to count on friends in Lost Trail whom, in their steady advance, they were leaving rapidly behind them.

16.

LOW, PINE-CLAD HILLS surrounded Crow Track ranch on all sides in a loose embrace. When he left Pat Stevens that morning, it was Dale Marlin's plan to climb one of the near ridges from whose rocky crown he could command a view of the ranch.

Granite dikes and ledges repeatedly forced him to circle

back, and he was nearing the upper end of a particular ridge, still seeking access to the heights, when the crackling sound of some animal forcing its way through the underbrush littering the flats arrested his progress.

In this remote country, deer or even elk sometimes found their way down close to the ranches. The wild things were more apt to be seeking the tender, low-hanging browse here than any of the ranch stock, although occasionally a tough moss-horned steer thus sought relief from the pestiferous flies.

But the longer he listened, the more Marlin became convinced that these sounds proceeded from a shod pony. He quietly dismounted as the crashing and crackling drew steadily nearer and led his mount into the dense cover of a fir thicket. Here he waited, peering out through the thick fronds.

His chief motive, since Pat had warned him to careful concealment of his activities, was to prevent discovery of his own presence. But a few minutes later he found reason in plenty to be thankful for his caution. One glimpse of the intent and hurried rider forcing his way through the thick growth fifty yards away, and Marlin promptly squatted, waiting in breath-bated silence for the other man to move by and pass on.

"What's Morrill doin' out here in the woods?" he thought. "It don't make sense, with all the open trails he could take away from the ranch."

He was instantly aware that Fern's cousin was bound on some clandestine errand, in which Morrill did not propose to be detected. It was the more surprising because Marlin had never placed any special significance on Ranse's movements. In the past Morrill had seemed almost conscientiously to foster his reputation as a waster and parasite, a policy which at the time had appeared mere indifference to public opinion. Even now Morrill's status was by no means clear, and the puncher was conscious of growing amazement that it should have been even questioned.

"What did Stevens get wise to, that the rest of us missed?" he wondered.

The diminishing sound of Morrill's progress persuaded him to put idle speculation aside. A few minutes later he led his horse out and, by a roundabout course, proceeded to pick up Morrill's trail. Half a mile farther on, this led out of the dense growth into more open country, and Marlin was able to draw up on the man he was following.

From a low ridge he caught sight of Ranse at last, jogging across an open flat. Near its head Morrill drew rein and sat glancing about as if waiting for something. Ten minutes passed and he had not moved, except to dismount and try his cinches.

Suddenly Marlin crouched. Faint sounds of horses came to his ears, and he presently spotted three riders. They were Crow Track hands. Marlin recognized Sonny Day and Bull Lackey, both men of questionable character to say the least. Lackey had spearheaded the treacherous attack on Marlin, there at the ranch, and the latter would not soon forget his flat, brutal face.

The puncher's eyes narrowed as the three men joined Morrill. They talked for a few minutes and then started off in a group. It was all done so casually that Marlin knew it must have been prearranged.

"Now what?" he muttered, hurrying back to his horse.

Exercising more caution than ever, he succeeded in keeping the four men in sight as they struck north across the range. Strongly suspecting their destination, he had no thought of abandoning the trail now till he was certain.

Four or five miles from Crow Track, Morrill and his companions approached a deep fold in the hills. Marlin saw they were heading for the mouth of Pine Canyon. Reaching the deep rocky gorge, they halted. The Crow Track hands dismounted and walked a hundred yards or so away from the spot, spreading out in the manner of sentries. Seating themselves on the rocks, they were manifestly preparing for guard duty which might stretch out over some length of time.

Marlin saw Ranse turn into the mouth of the canyon and

proceed alone, in a manner which said his surroundings were not unfamiliar to him. Noting this, the puncher frowned. "What's he up to now?" he murmured.

He was instantly eaten with curiosity, not only concerning Morrill's object, but about what might be concealed by the isolated fastness of Pine Canyon; and he paused only a moment before putting his thoughts into action. He pulled back and circled a full mile before again approaching the ridge which enclosed the canyon on this side. It was a rugged slope, and Marlin was forced to climb at a long tangent, every foot he advanced taking him farther away from the guards below.

Reaching the ledge-fanged crest, he peered over cautiously into the canyon. The far side rose in a beetling gray cliff, but under him the canyon wall slanted down less steeply, a stiff slope so overgrown with piñon and spruce that little could be made out below in the depths.

Marlin abandoned his horse and started down toward a rocky spine whose spiked crown lifted above the tops of the trees. Precarious clambering won him a vantage point from which to scan the chasm opening below him.

Heavy growth so choked even the canyon's floor that the eyes were bewildered. Marlin studied the slopes near and far, subjecting every rod to a minute scrutiny. At length he was rewarded. Down among the pines, so unobtrusive as to be almost unnoticeable, he caught the movement of a horse, its bay hide contrasting with the green foliage.

Marlin tensed. "That's the bronc Ranse was forkin'. Ground tethered, I reckon. He can't be far—"

With infinite care he proceeded to work his way downward, following the gullies and clinging to piñon clumps. The shadow of the opposite wall, and a slackening of the slope's steep pitch, at length warned him he was nearing the bottom.

Marlin stole on like a flitting shade, working from pine to pine and studying each advance with care. He froze at the sudden harsh sound of a human voice, startlingly near. Peering cautiously, he made out the shape of a log shelter, ob-

scured on this side by a brush tangle. It was a rough structure, the existence of which Marlin had never before guessed, though he had visited Pine Canyon more than once in the past, and he divined instantly that Ranse Morrill had come here for a secret meeting.

With painstaking care, and many delays, Marlin started to work around the shelter, which was little more than a weather shield for men and horses, having two open sides, the roof supported by poles. He got a partial glimpse of Morrill, seated on a log and leaning forward in earnest conversation with someone unseen.

Although forced to work farther back to avoid exposure, Marlin pushed on, crawling at times, until by lifting his head he was able to get a full view of the interior. What he saw fetched a grunt out of him which he quickly suppressed.

Three men were seated in the tumbledown shelter, their heads together in sober conference. And the men whom Morrill had ridden so far to see were Ike Taggart, the manager of Pomerene's Padlock ranch in Rustler's Canyon, and Brazos LaFors.

LaFors' presence alone was enough to clinch the shady character of this confab. His familiarity with Ranse Morrill and Taggart, men considered at least respectable and honest, was more than enough to implicate them both in pretty much all of the crooked activities which had wracked the Yellowhammer country of late.

"Why, this ties Morrill up with the rustlers themselves. And damned if it don't look mighty bad for Taggart too!" Marlin breathed.

Watching narrowly, he seemed to make out that Morrill was issuing orders with self-assertive decision. Ranse waggled a finger at the other men and jerked his chin down at intervals as if to drive home his commandments. Marlin stared at him in wonderment. "We sure had you underrated, mister," he reflected grimly.

The knowledge of Morrill's unquestionable perfidy, contributing as it must have to Dunk Pomerene's early death, raked the puncher with remembrance of Fern. So far as he

knew, the girl did not even guess her cousin's true colors. It was the more abominable in that Fern had long and loyally supported Ranse, backing him up and extending her full trust without question.

"She's got to know this," Marlin thought resolutely. Nor would that duty admit of delay. It was the work of a trying, impatient half hour to win away from the log shelter to the thick cover of the canyon side. Marlin climbed swiftly then, and he was hot and wet by the time he reached his horse. With no time to be lost, he swung up and set out, taking care only to avoid the men posted at the mouth of the canyon, he now knew, to prevent just such a discovery as he had made.

Fern Pomerene came running to the back door when Marlin clattered into the Crow Track yard. One look at his face, and she was at his knee before he could dismount.

"Dale! What is it now?" she exclaimed anxiously. "Has something happened?"

Now that they were face to face, and he had only to tell his story, Marlin's tongue seemed weighted with lead. He stared at her with worried eyes. "You ain't going to like this, Fern," he burst out.

She met his look without change of expression. "If it must be told, I suppose it may as well be now—"

Briefly explaining Pat Stevens' instructions, Marlin told where he had been and what he had learned.

"But this is impossible!" she exclaimed at the end, incredulously. "Are you sure LaFors wasn't double-crossing Ranse and Mr. Taggart? There's no mistake?"

"Morrill heard from Stevens himself what we caught Brazos doin'." Marlin's tone was hard and flat. "Figure it out. I don't like this any better than you do—but there it is!"

Fern's horrified expression deepened. "I can hardly believe it of Ranse," she managed unsteadily. "These men must be using him for their own purposes—"

"With Morrill handin' out orders to that hard-boiled Taggart?" he caught her up quickly. "Don't fool yourself. He knows what he's doin' every minute!"

"And Pat knew," she breathed. "This went on under our eyes, but it took him to discover it."

"I reckon he wasn't the first to guess," he returned dourly.

"No?" She looked vague.

"No. I think yore dad suspected something of the kind. Lookin' back, I can see he was deathly afraid it was true. He knew *he'd* never drag it out of Morrill. So he hired Stevens—"

"But that was brave!" the girl half-cried, the tears very near her eyes. "Father cared for Ranse. I know he did. It must have hurt him terribly to face such a possibility, and then make a decision he knew would either prove or disprove his worst fears!"

"I'm gettin' a different picture of yore old man since I've known Stevens," Marlin acknowledged. "Maybe I was wrong about some other things too."

Her gaze said what she thought of his honesty. "Father was wonderful," she averred. "If he left a task unfinished—and I fear he did—it is our duty to finish it . . . It isn't *certain* that Ranse is involved in the—the rustling," she broke out, with forlorn hopefulness. "If he *should* be innocent, Pat will discover that too. You must take your information to him at once!"

"And leave you here alone? What if Morrill comes back, Fern? Where's Buckner?"

"He went in to town on business," she replied. "Don't delay. You must hurry, Dale. As for Ranse doing me any injury, or anyone else, that's preposterous. Why, only a day ago he—" She stopped.

"He what?"

But she would not say and insisted instead on his immediate departure. Marlin knew he must reach Stevens, and after another moment or two he reluctantly turned away.

But every foot of land he put between himself and the ranch felt uncomfortably like dragging a stone boat. Some strong impulse warned him not to leave, and fighting it, he looked back repeatedly.

Moreover, he did not take the direct trail to town, but cut across the range so that he would pass within a mile or

two of Pine Canyon. There was a chance that he might catch a further glimpse of Ranse Morrill and his confederates and thus be able to post Pat Stevens on their latest movements.

He did not see Morrill or the Crow Track hands; but hauled up on a height from which he could view the range for several miles, he suddenly jerked to attention on descrying a single rider racing across the flats below. A single long look, and Marlin felt as if the breath were being squeezed out of his chest.

It was Fern—he recognized her buckskin bronc and her bright riding clothes instantly even from this distance—and she was making directly for Pine Canyon as fast as the pony could carry her.

"Has she gone mad?" Marlin groaned. "If she rides into that wolves' den there's no tellin' what may happen to her!"

Roweling his mount forward, he started after her at a reckless speed, only too well aware that there would not be time to overtake her, yet hoping for some miracle. By the time he had closed the distance between them to half a mile, he saw to his chagrin that the mouth of Pine Canyon was close. Even if he reached the girl at the last minute, they could not escape the observation of the Crow Track guards. A gunshot, fired to attract her attention, would be a fatal mistake for the same reason.

Five minutes later Marlin, hopelessly tardy, drew up in a fringe of willows and watched Fern ride forward to join the men at the mouth of the canyon. Doubtless she entertained no fears of her ability to handle her own employees without difficulty.

Even as she dismounted and the punchers gathered to talk to her, Ranse Morrill came jogging jauntily out of the mouth of the canyon. Neither Taggart nor Brazos LaFors was with him. Seeing her, Ranse showed surprise and rode forward with an easy manner.

Marlin began at last to appreciate the other man's iron poise. Even now Morrill acted as if a meeting with his cousin here were the most natural thing in the world—at least as far as he was concerned.

There was a lengthy conversation, which Marlin would have given a fortune to overhear. He knew his greatest usefulness lay in holding aloof, awaiting the logical moment for interference. And presently he found occasion to be glad of his caution, as Morrill, Fern, and the Crow Track hands set off in a group, taking a direction which, Marlin shrewdly guessed, would lead them ultimately to the little town of Bucktail, deep in the mountains.

"What's the meanin' of that?" Marlin asked himself in deep mystification. Morrill, he knew without hesitation, was up to some dark scheme of his own. That the other would dare resort to violence he did not even pause to consider. Yet Ranse undoubtedly had a plan, and was acting upon it.

Whatever it was, Marlin proposed to find out. Hanging back only far enough to escape detection, he took up the trail with dogged determination.

17.

IT WAS SWELTERING MIDDAY when, dusty and wordless but otherwise untouched by their long ride, the ranchers' posse drew within sight of the dark, frowning gash on the flank of Split-Rock Mesa that was the canyon home of Pomerene's Padlock ranch.

They pressed forward in a close-knit band, eyes slitted beneath their hatbrims. More than one of the men freed his six-gun in his scabbard, or reached down to make sure of his rifle.

"Yuh expect any trouble gittin' in that canyon?" Sam asked Pat.

The latter shrugged. "Does it matter?"

The glint in Sam's eyes and his snort said he was inclined to hope there would be.

They were still a quarter-mile from the rocky portals, yet closing in rapidly, when the flat crack of a rifle rang out from the heights. All saw the puff of dust kicked up in the trail a hundred yards to the fore.

"LaFors got here with his warnin'," Sheriff Crotty growled significantly.

The posse had scattered instinctively at sound of the shot. At Crotty's gesture they drew up for a discussion. The lawman was scanning the heights narrowly. "Whoever is up there, he's servin' notice for us to turn back," he rumbled. "What do yuh suggest, Stevens?"

"We'll have to flank the canyon," Pat said. "One man to circle each side should do it. This may be a bluff, but we can't afford the time to make sure."

A man was dispatched to climb the mesa on either side of Rustler's Canyon. Bragg, the Rafter H man, took one side, and Pat selected Ezra for the other. While he did not mention it, he expected the one-eyed man's exceptional tracking ability to pay off, since Ezra was given instructions to scan the length of the canyon on his side.

The two men were given twenty minutes to get started. At the end of that time, firing broke out high up in the rocks. Bragg was seen, driving his horse headlong through the pines up there; and above him, the posse glimpsed a fleeing man.

"Bragg's smoked the guard out," Sam exclaimed. "What're we waitin' for?"

With Pat and Crotty in the lead, the ranchers were already starting for the canyon mouth. Ominous silence greeted them as they rode into the shade of the crumbling granite bastions.

No further shots ripped the quiet. Pat gazed forward curiously as the lower end of the canyon opened out. Clogged and mounded with heaps of rocky debris, this was indeed the entrance to a mountain fortress. A man or two with high-powered rifles could have held it indefinitely.

On a rise above the tumbling creek, the Padlock ranch house, a long rambling structure built of stone, wore a curious

look of abandonment. Crotty waved toward it, and two men detached themselves to ride up there.

From this point, back up the winding canyon as far as the eye could see, stretched a green carpet of waving mountain bluestem. Everywhere grazing M Bar steers, their red hides dotting the green, were to be seen.

"There ain't nothin' wrong here," Polk Buckner exclaimed harshly. "It's all regular, far's I can see. Hope yuh ain't made a big mistake, Stevens!"

Crotty and the other men waited for Pat's reply.

"How regular is it, with a rifle guard out, and Taggart and his men nowhere in sight, Buckner?" Pat queried smoothly.

"Wal—that ain't explained," Polk admitted. "Mebby they're workin' up the canyon."

"Sure. We'll soon know."

The men who had searched the house hurried up to report no one about. Of the few horses in the corrals, two were worn and gaunted from hard riding. Pat exchanged a significant glance with Jeb Crotty, on hearing that.

They pressed on at a steady pace. Rifles were out now, and keen looks probed the canyon at every stride of the horses. Scattering, the ranchers methodically checked the brands on every steer that was sighted.

One man rode steadily onward, drawing beyond the others. Pat noticed him just as he was about to pass out of sight.

"Who's that, crowding way ahead there?" he called, though he knew well enough who it was.

"It's Buckner," Lafe Kyle ejaculated, turning in the saddle. "We got to stop him pushin' on the reins like that. He'll warn anybody that happens to be layin' low up there!"

He and another alert rancher pushed on to herd the Crow Track foreman back with the rest. Buckner appeared disgusted.

"Did you see him signal anyone?" Pat asked Kyle severely.

"No, Stevens. Reckon he didn't have time—or get the chance," was the answer.

Buckner rode straight to Pat, his face set. "What d'yuh mean?" he flung down the gauntlet, low-voiced. "Damn yuh, Stevens, I'll have yuh know I ain't in with them rustlers!"

"I've known that since the night you stood up for Marlin at Crow Track," Pat returned as guardedly. "But *he* wasn't sure of it—and these fellows ain't either. Get wise to yourself, Buckner! It's up to you to prove where you stand. You'll do it this trip, if I have to shove your chance at you!"

Buckner swallowed hard, glaring.

Half an hour later, and several miles up the lofty canyon, a sudden shout was raised. A man waved his arms wildly. It was Lafe Kyle, and his face, turned toward the others, was suffused with angry blood.

A number of men hurried to him. Kyle pointed dramatically to several steers, alarmed at the approach of men, pounding away across a hollow. On the flank of the nearest could be plainly discerned the deeply scored brand. It was Rocking K. Kyle had discovered one of his own steers.

"Yuh was right, Stevens!" he burst out hoarsely. "By Gawd, we'll git to the bottom of this!"

Polk Buckner's blocky face was a study as he stared at the steers. Not a one of them wore the M Bar brand which identified Pomerene's stock. The Crow Track ramrod appeared unable to credit his own eyes. "Where's that damned Taggart?" he roared sulphurously. "He'll be explainin' this pronto!"

Pushing on, they were not long in running across more rustled stock. But to Pat, the slimness of their numbers in comparison to what he had seen before, was ominous. Long stretches of rich graze stood empty and silent.

"Lots of cows been in here," Sam exclaimed. "Yuh can see their sign everywhere. Where'd they go?"

Pat was anxiously studying the canyon rim. Bragg had put in an appearance up there, and he scrambled laboriously down his side to join the posse; but as yet Ezra, taking the other rim of the canyon, was nowhere to be seen.

"Yuh don't reckon he's run into lead, do yuh?" Sam inquired anxiously.

Pat shook his head. There was no way of knowing. Twenty minutes later the posse had reached a wild stretch of the canyon where no cattle at all were to be found. Rankin, of Circle R, turned on Pat.

"Yuh tipped us off too late, Stevens," he accused. "The rustlers've made a quick gather an' skipped the country! What chance've we got of overhaulin' 'em now?"

Pat was not listening. His head had swiveled around at a faint hail. His eye swept the rim to the east, and stopped. A tiny figure up there was waving vehemently.

"There's Ez," Pat called out, pointing. "Looks like he's in a sweat over something!"

"Why don't he come down?" a man demanded.

"He's motionin' to us to come up." It was Crotty who spoke. "Let's go, boys. He's got hold of somethin'!"

After a hasty search, a crevice was discovered up which they were able to fight their way by dint of much effort, occasionally dismounting to lead their horses. Ezra met them at the top. His one eye burned under the pent brow as he raked them with shrewd scrutiny.

"Didn't find much rustled stuff down there in the canyon, did yuh?" he exclaimed harshly.

"What've you got, Ez?" Pat threw at him sharply.

"Nothin' much. Picked up the sign of a trailin' herd, is all," Ezra returned nonchalantly. "It's my guess that all them overbranded cows're takin' a walk—"

"All right. Show us!"

The terrain on this part of Split-Rock Mesa was incredibly rugged. Riding in the shadow of looming Uncompahgre Peak, they threaded their way over loose rubble and around huge boulders. Thick patches of piñon barred their way; cedar scattered the rocky slopes.

Ezra led the way to a saddle between rising mountain shoulders, and here the possemen halted with a deep-chested rumble of wrath. All too plain in the beaten dust lay the marks of the passage of many cattle. They were high up, here. Crotty leveled a bony finger, pointing down over the rugged slopes tumbling away into the north.

"It's them, boys!" His tone was bleak. "They're trailin' out to the Gunnison country—every head of rustled stuff the buzzards could throw together in a hurry! They're makin' a clean sweep!"

"This ain't but a few hours old," Lafe Kyle broke out roughly, scanning the trail. "We'll overtake 'em or bust tryin'!"

They struck into the trail and strung out, riding smartly. Reaching a waterhole at which the cattle had stopped, they paused long enough to note the moisture still seeping into the muddy tracks about its edges.

Pat Stevens was tacitly accorded the leadership now. It was he who had led them to the place where the rustled stock had been held. They depended on him to finish the grim task, and he rode at their head, knee to knee with Crotty, into whose eyes a new look of speculation had crept, not untinged with respect.

"Yuh got a long head on yuh, Stevens," he murmured. "It took you to do what we've all wanted for months—get a straight line on them slippery wolves. Even Buckner's on fire to catch up with 'em. . . . Reckon Polk's throwin' a surprise into a lot of these men today!"

Pat's nod held a reservation. The margin between Buckner's guilt and innocence, in the minds of these men, was still so narrow that he was willing to let the man's actions put him to the proof.

The sun was far down in the west, and they were in lower country, before Bragg, the Rafter H foreman, vented an exclamation, pointing.

"Look at that! A dust cloud, with the sun on it!"

He was right. Three miles away, a golden pall hovered in the coppery sky, traveling slowly on. It could only come, in this desolate country, from the rustled herd being driven on toward the Gunnison Basin.

To a man, they crowded their horses into a run. Slowly the distance closed. In this rolling expanse of scattered cedar and rocks, vision was easily deceived. Closely as he

watched, Pat was not prepared for it when a rifle cracked, and a slug ripped through the cedars near at hand.

The men were in no mood to be stopped now. Little caring whether they were outnumbered or not, they jammed their jaded mounts forward, spreading out, their guns ready.

Sam Sloan's carbine exploded a moment later. Pat saw a man abandon the cutbank behind which he had lain hidden and ride after the rustlers in open flight. Several Winchesters spanged as the possemen threw down on him. The rustler lurched in his saddle but recovered and, crouching over, roweled his mount into a gallop.

Soon afterward a shout went up as the men caught sight of the herd. Through the dust pall the rustlers could be seen, frenziedly urging the stock to greater speed. It was already running.

"Some of you swing around," Pat called over his shoulder, with a wave. "We'll close on them, hard and fast!"

The posse split, one part, led by Polk Buckner, sweeping to the right. The rustlers, aware of their dilemma, were staring back now, white faces blazing through the obscuring dust, which took on a blood-red cast from the setting sun. Guns began to crack. Pat saw a rancher jerk erect and clutch his arm.

The rest did not pause. With Pat to the fore, Sam, Ezra, Crotty and one or two others closed with the outer fringe of the herd. The steers were stampeding, thundering along with clashing horns and a wild and dolorous bellowing.

At sight of one of the rustlers, Sam and Crotty fired simultaneously. The man whirled. All recognized Bull Lackey, the Crow Track bully.

"Give yoreself up, Lackey!" the sheriff roared.

Instead of replying, Lackey plunged into the midst of the racing herd and for a time was lost to view in the dust. Suddenly Ezra wheeled as the big rustler appeared almost behind them. The one-eyed man's Colt barked. Bull buckled in the hull, on the verge of tumbling to the ground under those slashing hoofs. Somehow he hung on. Ezra hurled his bronc straight at the other. Reaching him by what seemed

a miracle, though adept horsemanship had more to do with it, Ezra grabbed the man. Lackey lunged at him like an uncoiling spring, and for a moment they struggled perilously.

Before anyone could reach them, Lackey slumped. Ezra managed to edge the two broncs toward the open. A moment later, Sam looked back and laughed.

"Hey!" he heard his lanky partner's bull-like bellow of exasperation. "Somebody take charge o' this stuffed owlhoot! I got business!"

Pat was working toward a spot where, a second ago, he had glimpsed an obscure figure in the ruck of the herd. Wanting a better look, he strained to peer through the blanketing red murk. The flat cracks of gunfire sounded from other directions, but he ignored it. Even as he got a flash of the man he sought, he heard an exclamation beside him.

"It's him!" Sam burst out excitedly. "Brazos LaFors! Smoke him, Pat!"

Pat reached out and knocked up the little man's leveled gunbarrel. "Leave LaFors to me," he warned in a thin voice. "I aim to take him alive if he don't force my hand!"

Next instant they saw Brazos break from the herd and strike away at an angle, his horse running like mad. Sam's snap shot at the bronc had no perceptible effect.

Pat waved him back. "Stay with the steers," he called. "Try to turn 'em. I'll stop Brazos!"

Once clear of the rumbling stampede, with its choking pall, the clean air struck his lungs with revivifying vigor. Eyes sweeping the barren range, he was astonished at the length of time which had passed. Twilight hung over the mountain ranges, the shades of dusk lowering.

He saw Brazos plunge into an arroyo, and spurred after. The wily breed was relying on darkness to save him. Cutting over, Pat dived down the steep bank with a scattering of loose dirt and gained several rods on the fleeing rustler.

As his horse stretched out, low to the ground, Brazos looked back. The crack of his gun came only after Pat heard the soft flutter of lead past his face. He did not bother to reply. After that, LaFors placed his hopes on the fleetness

of his horse. In vain! Steadily Pat closed the gap between them.

"Give it up, Brazos!" he called. "You'll never get away!"

The breed's response was to pull abruptly toward a high barranca, hurling his mount at the slope. Up the brute went, scrambling like an agile cat. Brazos was playing desperately for just a few minutes longer. Darkness was almost upon them.

He reckoned without Pat's cold determination, however. At the base of the barranca, the latter hauled in with a jerk. Winchester in his upraised hands, he delayed a split second. From the top of the slope, LaFors whirled to hurl a backward shot, and that briefest of pauses proved his undoing.

Aligning his sights on that dark shape silhouetted against the paler sky, Pat squeezed the trigger.

The effect of his shot was electric. Shot through the head, LaFors' horse reared high on its hind feet. The breed's terrified scream had absolutely no effect whatever. After a tottering moment, the pony plunged backward, crashing down the slope and carrying its rider with it.

Pat yanked his bronc aside just in time. In the thickening gloom down there, he only sensed what was happening.

Having in some miraculous manner escaped the crushing weight of his mount, Brazos sprang up with spitting six-gun. Red tongues stabbed the darkness as he probed for Pat's life. Sitting his saddle like rock, Pat let the rifle slip down. Drawing and cocking his Colt in a single motion, he let go one blasting charge. It was enough. Struck in the region of the belt, LaFors jackknifed and fell backward as if kicked.

Pat slipped from the saddle and closed in, circling. After a long moment he struck a match, and then straightened. There was no further need for caution.

"You made me do it, LaFors," he intoned, before turning away. "It was either you or me."

18.

THE OMINOUS, earth-shaking rumble of the herd had died away when Pat climbed out of the arroyo. The star-shot night flung its gray curtain over the range. He could see little beyond the shadowy dark clumps of cedar near at hand.

A shrill cowboy *yipee-e!* came to his ears as he rode north, and a moment later he caught other cries, floating from the distance. He lifted his horse to a faster pace. Topping a rise, he discerned a vaguely churning mass below in the spreading hollow, and now the stamp of hoofs and calling of riders came more clearly.

"They turned the herd and milled it to a standstill," he murmured. "Just in time, too—"

Had the stock scattered and drifted in the dark, it would have spelled more than one day's work to gather it again—if, indeed, that was possible at all in this rough land. Moreover, the rustlers would have succeeded in driving off small bunches under cover of the night; a maneuver these desperate men had unquestionably counted on.

A horseman swept toward Pat out of the gloom as he neared the herd. "Throw down yore guns, or take it!" a rough voice rasped.

"All right, Ez," Pat returned swiftly.

The other hauled in a few feet away, peering sharply. "You, Pat?" he growled. "Where in time yuh been?"

The possemen were strung out around the cattle to hold them. Hearing the low-voiced talk, several rode this way. Pat recognized the rugged silhouette of Jeb Crotty, and

Polk Buckner's flat voice sounded. "What was that yuh was foggin', Stevens?"

"It was Brazos LaFors—"

"Hunh!" the Crow Track foreman burst out. "That identifies two of 'em. We got Lackey over here, with a busted arm. Did the breed get away?"

"No, Buckner. He didn't make it."

"Wal, that's somethin'." Sheriff Crotty was gruff. "Five or six of 'em broke fer the open, Stevens. They give us the slip in the dark."

They discussed the situation tensely. Pat alone was inclined to take a cheerful view of it.

"We've grabbed the steers," he pointed out. "And that gang'll never again operate on this range. It means that with their stock recovered, most of these small ranchers can go on without folding. To them, that's plenty."

"But dammit, we let them blasted crooks slip through our fingers!" Polk exclaimed. "An' what about Taggart? Is he one of 'em—or what did they do with him? For all we know, Ike may be layin' somewheres back in Rustler's Canyon with a slug through his ribs—while the hombres that did it are goin' scot-free!"

His wrath seemed out of all proportion to the occasion for it. Others appeared to believe him talking largely for effect.

Pat peered at him sharply. "Let's cross our bridges when we come to 'em," he suggested coolly.

Buckner stormed away.

Pat turned to Crotty. "What about him?" he asked the lawman in a low voice. "I was too busy with LaFors to notice. Did Buckner have anything to do with the rest of those wolves getting away?"

"Wouldn't say so," Jeb drawled. "He near killed his bronc tryin' to grab 'em—an' he was fit to be tied, when they made it."

It was the answer Pat had played for, and he was quick to drop the subject.

The herd had quieted at last. Since nothing could be done before dawn, it was decided to bed them down where they

were. Some of the men, wearied to exhaustion, were already rolling in their blankets alongside their tethered mounts.

Guards were posted, Sam and Ezra stoutly insisting on taking their turns. Pat finally settled to rest. He planned to give himself only an hour or two, yet it seemed only a matter of minutes before he was jerked broad awake by a thundering commotion and the flat crack of a gun.

He started up, gazing about, and knew at once what was afoot. Half a mile to the east could be seen a blazing red beacon which crimsoned the night. The steers were on their feet, churning and striving wildly to break away.

It was the work of the rustlers. Like wolves harrying the fringes of a buffalo herd, they were still hanging around. In the hope of stampeding the captured herd and making off with at least some of the remnants, they had fired a tindery cedar. They were out there now, awaiting the results.

The ranchers were instantly alert to what impended. As Pat threw his saddle on and yanked home the cinches, the others broke into frenzied motion. Within two minutes they were sweeping round the flank of the uneasy cattle, striving to hold them where they were. Tossing out his instructions coolly, Pat saw that the line held. But every man in the posse was boiling.

"They got a gall, tryin' anything like this on us!" Sam exploded fiercely.

"They're cuttin' their own throats," Ezra roared. "Come daylight, I'll track 'em down if the trail leads to hell!"

With a spurt of flame like a skyrocket, a second dry cedar blazed into the night. The steers milled more anxiously, groaning and bellowing. A spate of cursing broke out across the herd as it began inexorably to drift. Jeb Crotty's bull voice could be heard, bellowing orders.

"Let 'em go!" Pat called out. "Don't try to bottle 'em! They'll tear loose sure!"

"They'll tear loose all right, once they git started!" Lafe Kyle hurled at him angrily.

"Stay with the flank, Kyle, so they don't break," Pat snapped authoritatively. "That'll be your job!"

Lafe snarled, in a frenzy as he saw the chance of his recovered stock being scattered once more. Others were no less vocal. But they did as they were told. Ten minutes later they began to see Pat's object as the jostling, butting steers started to pour down into a broad arroyo. Pat spurred to the fore, calling the others after him.

"Now hold 'em!" he cried. "Everything depends on their staying here! Block the draws! Make sure that none climb the banks!"

For long tense moments the men were busily occupied, at the full stretch of their energies. There was time for the thought of nothing save holding the cattle and calming them. Even the flagging horses rose to the occasion. Pat was everywhere, turning back steers, calling orders, needling the men to unstinted effort.

After an interval of doubt, it began to grow apparent that the herd would hold. Gradually the spooky animals quieted down.

"Now let 'em burn all the cedars on the range!" Ezra burst out wolfishly. "The stock can't see it anyway, over them high banks!"

"Purty slick, Stevens!" Bragg exclaimed admiringly. "Reckon I can see how come yuh rate yore job now!"

Others were as briefly and gruffly complimentary. The rustlers, reckless and playing for high stakes as they were, had been neatly circumvented, since it seemed plain they dared not approach close enough now to stampede the stock without risking an actual brush with the posse. Much depended on how desperate they were, and Pat warned against any relaxation of vigilance.

Round a bend in the arroyo, beyond sight of the settling herd, a short time later he found that a couple of ranchmen, Rankin and another, had started a small campfire. Someone had packed a supply of coffee in a saddle pocket, and with water from a canteen they were preparing to brew a heartening draught for all hands.

Pat and Crotty were among the first to be called over.

"We can spare a few men now to slip out and hand those buzzards a jolt, Stevens," the sheriff said, over his drink.

Pat had been thinking the same thing. "Notify the ones you want, Crotty, and we'll move out quietly."

Half a dozen were chosen, including Sam and Ezra. With Pat at their head, they rode up a tributary wash and found themselves on the level of the prairie. Here they reined up. The cedar torches had burned down and were no more than smoldering red eyes in the blanketing darkness.

"They're wise that we skunked 'em," Crotty muttered. "Either they'll pull up stakes an' drift, or try somethin' else. . . . Where to, Stevens?" he asked.

"We'll mosey out that way, and listen and watch," Pat said after a moment. "There's no hope for a moon tonight. Anything we can do will be blind luck."

Riding bunched, their horses' hoofs muffled in the dust, they had proceeded scarcely a quarter of a mile when, without any warning, a rattling burst of gunfire broke out behind them. All whirled.

"That must've been there at the fire!" Ezra ejaculated.

Pat roweled his bronc that way with a jump. Riding at full tilt, he was all but flung from his saddle a moment later as his horse plunged into the winding arroyo. The others came clattering down at his heels.

Straightening out, they were barely lengthening into their stride again when a flash streaked the night almost in their faces. Others followed, the echo of gunfire bouncing back and forth off the enclosing banks.

"It's the rustlers!" Sam yelled, unlimbering his own weapon. "They rushed the fire an' got smoked! We've got 'em bottled right here in front of us!"

Pat knew he had hit on the truth. Dark shadows loomed up before them; scrambling hoofs tore unavailingly at the steep banks of the arroyo as the renegades strove to escape; a harsh voice broke into excited cursing.

Catapulting his mount straight at the foremost, Pat collided with a horseman who turned into a writhing wildcat the instant that grappling arms closed about his waist. A

waving six-gun exploded near Pat's face and barely missed smashing him alongside the head. With a grunt, he lifted the rustler bodily out of his seat and threw him to the ground.

Leaping down, he saw the man struggling to rise, and slugged him once, full in the face. The stock thief slumped down with a groan.

All around Pat gunfire was crackling hotly. He heard Ezra vent a wrathful bellow. It was followed abruptly by a scream of fear uttered in another voice. For a moment this hubbub continued, then it subsided.

"Are yuh givin' up?" Crotty's harsh demand came out of the darkness. A growl of hasty assent answered him.

"Gather 'em up, boys," the sheriff called. "We'll drag 'em down to the fire an' look our catch over."

Pat alone saw the single shadowy form stealing off up the arroyo on foot. Leaping that way, gun in hand, he made a wild guess at who it might be.

"Throw down your gun, Taggart, and give yourself up!" he cried piercingly.

He was not surprised when the fugitive darted ahead sprinting. An attempt to climb the crumbling bank of the arroyo failed. The quarry sprang forward again, and now Pat saw him clearly silhouetted against the fire. Running after, he could have cut the man down with a single shot, but at the last minute he desisted. Just in time he made out Polk Buckner's blocky shape standing at the fire's edge. Nothing could have suited his purpose better. Holding his fire, he drove the rustler that way.

The renegade burst straight toward the blaze, his gun glinting. He threw it up without breaking stride. A double explosion rocked the night. As if tripped in the air, the running man dived headfirst, toppled end over end, and flopped to a dusty stop.

Turning back, Pat sought the man he had slugged, and hauled him up. "Come on. We'll get down there now."

It was a scrambled procession that found its way a few minutes later into the light of the fire. Once there, Pat dropped his captive in a slumping heap and stood at gaze.

A handful of possemen were gathered around the flickering blaze, and at their head stood Polk Buckner. His smoking gun was still in his grasp and at his feet lay a sprawling figure whose shirt was wet with blood, and who clawed at the dirt as he gasped for breath. The man's hat had fallen off. A glance took in the hard-bitten face under the straggly black hair, and the bristling black mustache.

"Who's this you bagged, Buckner?" Pat rapped out.

"Wal, it's Ike Taggart—none other," Polk rasped, never taking his eyes off the fallen man. "Did yuh grab the rest of his sneakin' gang, Stevens?"

"Reckon we did. Five of 'em anyways," Jeb Crotty put in. He stepped forward, glancing down. "What about it, Taggart—how many of yuh was there?"

"That's—all of us," Taggart panted. "Except mebby—Brazos. Did he make—it?"

"No, Taggart. He didn't," Pat told him shortly.

He rode forward, kneeling beside the wounded man, and eased him into a more comfortable position.

"You all rode into more than you could ride back out of, this time," he went on steadily. "LaFors stopped a slug and he's done . . . What happened to you, Taggart?"

"I played out my—string," the wounded man gasped. "We was makin'—a last play to stampede the stock. Buckner—shot me. . . ."

"Then Buckner had nothing to do with your crooked work?" Pat had no doubt of the answer, but he wanted Sheriff Crotty and these men to hear it.

"Hell—no. Polk was always too—stiff-necked to take a—chance. Don't b'lieve he even knew some of his—own punchers was in with us."

Buckner, scowling nearby, turned to scan the captives. His outthrust jaw said that he recognized his own men. A red tide crawled up from under his collar.

"You never ran this rustling game, Taggart," Pat said positively. "Who *was* behind it?" We'll catch up with him anyway; if you don't talk, you'll only be delaying us—"

"Yuh mean yuh ain't—caught up with Morrill yet?" the Padlock foreman asked hoarsely.

Polk Buckner and Crotty both growled at this. Pat waved them to silence.

"So it was Morrill?" He nodded. "I had that pretty well doped out. But why did he do it?"

"Dunk held him down too—strict," was the gasping reply. "Ranse always did like to—toss money around. He—got it by sellin' off stock from the Padlock, without Pomerene knowin'. I was in—deep. When I threatened to tell old Dunk, Morrill suggested buildin' the count up with rustled stock. I—had to do somethin'. Ranse was in solid with them—Crow Track punchers. Dunno how he worked it. They drove out a few bunches of Yellowhammer steers—over-branded 'em in the canyon. It seemed safe. But things was gettin'—thick. I knew we'd have to quit or—clean up an' pull out. Yuh beat us to it!"

"Wal, dang Morrill's hide, anyhow!" Lafe Kyle burst out angrily. "So it was him kept the Yellowhammer range in an uproar—an' we didn't even guess! Yuh mean Pomerene never knowed none of this, Taggart?"

More than once a bloody froth had appeared on Taggart's pallid lips, and Pat had wiped it off. His voice had grown weaker till it was no more than a whisper. He tried to speak now, and couldn't. His hand lifted in a weak gesture. He shook his head. Next moment, with a convulsive start he stiffened and then relaxed limply. He was gone.

Not one of these hard-faced men wasted any sympathy on the luckless ranch foreman who had tossed away reputation and respect to turn rustler for the sake of a few dollars.

"Carry him down the arroyo a ways," Crotty instructed a couple of men, "an' kick the bank down over him. It'll keep the wolves off."

The prisoners had been roped together, their arms bound behind them. A guard was posted to make sure that none escaped. At the unexpected climax of their adventure, a few ranchers, Lafe Kyle among them, appeared consumed with a desire to discuss the entire affair. Pat, however, was not

interested. With Ezra and Sam, he drew apart to grab what rest he could before dawn.

All were astir by earliest light. For the first time, these men had a chance to examine the recovered cattle. Many were the exclamations of wrath over the blotched brands, and a few strove to check the count of their own steers, without any marked success.

The early sun saw the cattle driven out of the arroyo and strung out on the long trail back to the Yellowhammers. The men were lighthearted now, and it was Pat alone who did not neglect to keep a watch, both before them and to the rear. It was for this reason that he was the first to spot the single horseman advancing toward them at a steady pace.

Pat rode out, and it was not many minutes before he recognized Dale Marlin. The puncher was in a hurry. Seeing him, Sam and Ezra likewise advanced, and the four met some distance ahead of the herd.

"So yuh got the stock back!" the puncher exclaimed, his eyes alight.

"Yes, and most of the rustlers," Pat affirmed. "That includes Taggart, LaFors, Bull Lackey, and three or four other Crow Track hands—" His glance fixed. "That bunch won't be hounding you any more, Marlin."

"But yuh missed the head man," the latter interjected; and forthwith plunged into his own story, telling how he had trailed Morrill, Fern Pomerene, and the others into the north, after the meeting at Pine Canyon.

"Morrill and the girl are together?" Pat frowned swiftly. "That's bad. Where are they now?"

Marlin explained that Taggart and all but two of the punchers had ridden ahead, as he had suspected, to Rustler's Canyon. "That rat, Morrill, is still in Bucktail with Fern," he concluded. "Waitin' for news—if he's plannin' nothin' worse!"

"He could be, at that," Pat concurred soberly. He turned as Jeb Crotty came riding forward.

"We're pulling away from you, Crotty. The four of us," he informed the sheriff. "You'll probably find us waiting when you reach Bucktail—"

"What's it all about?" The lawman's tone was gruffly curious as he took in the air of urgency riding them all. "Anything to do with Morrill, by any chance?"

"I'm not sure yet what it'll amount to," Pat tossed over his shoulder as he turned his horse. "But one thing you can be certain of, Sheriff. If the chance turns up to grab Ranse Morrill with the goods, we won't fail you!"

19.

SITTING HER SADDLE tensely on the long ride to Bucktail with Ranse Morrill, Fern Pomerene had never felt more completely helpless. It was a new sensation for her, and one she did not wholly understand. She had exhausted every accusation against her cousin at her command, and Ranse had met each one with bland and forgiving self-assurance. It was at his confident proposal that they were going this way now. Morrill was not only persuasive; he seemed invulnerable.

"I can understand your doubts," he said easily. "It's an awful thing to face what you've been led to believe. You simply haven't given yourself time to stop and consider the reason for it all. That's natural."

She stared at him blankly. "I'm afraid I've considered it only too carefully." Her voice was taut. "Ranse, it's all too plain to be mistaken. Your being away from home for days at a time—your insistence that Father hand over the Padlock ranch to you—your intimacy with Brazos LaFors—"

Morrill spread his hands tolerantly. He was at his smooth best now. "All true. And I can prove to you that all of it—like everything that that prying Marlin says he saw—is only circumstantial and entirely untrue," was his suave rebuttal.

"Untrue, Ranse?" Her fearful gaze declared that she did not want to see this man proved a monster. She would have welcomed any logical explanation that would show it all up as a bad joke of fate.

"False as hell, and purely the result of jealousy. For one thing," he proceeded evenly, "you'll remember I told Pat Stevens I was aware of conditions at Split-Rock Mesa. Of course I demanded the management! I was trying desperately to straighten things out, before it was too late. Could I have found a better reason for staying away from home?"

"Go on," she said faintly.

"You can't get over finding me there at Pine Canyon, can you?" he teased soberly. "The truth is that I met LaFors and Ike Taggart at their own request . . . The 'orders' Marlin's so certain I was issuing?" He shook his head smilingly. "I'm afraid Brazos and Taggart didn't look at it quite that way. What I was giving them was an ultimatum!"

"An ultimatum, Ranse?"

"Yes. Brazos knew that Stevens had found them out—"

"But I don't understand what you could have added to that knowledge."

Morrill hesitated. "Well—it was a flat warning that Crow Track would no longer protect them."

Fern gasped.

"What are you saying?"

"I reminded them that Uncle Dunk was dead," he replied simply.

The girl's face went white. "You—you're implying—" She was unable to continue.

Morrill looked pained. "That Uncle Dunk knew about the rustling?" he finished for her. Surprise grew in his eyes. "Surely you knew that much, Fern? . . . You don't believe rustled stock could have been hidden in Rustler's Canyon without his knowledge? Or that Ike Taggart would have stood for it without quitting?"

Her expression of utter bewilderment told how nearly the blows struck home. "But this is incredible," she whispered.

"Is it?" He tossed his head in his superior way. "I don't know. Certainly you're aware of how many old-time cattlemen got their start. Uncle Dunk is no shining exception. He was desperate for more range. He couldn't buy it from these bullheaded Yellowhammer ranchers. So . . ." He shrugged expressively. "He did the next best thing, as any big man would."

"You mean—Father—"

"Ordered the rustling. Exactly," he assented brutally. "It was probably foolish to believe he could control the results," he went on with a show of practicality. "In the end it proved that he couldn't, powerful as he was. You know how he worried. He was stouthearted as a lion, but—" He broke off. "His heart was too tired."

Fern gazed away blindly, striving to cling to the scattered remnants of her wits. "Had Father been guilty of—what you say," she managed, "how could he have been foolish enough to hire Pat Stevens?"

"Hire a stock detective? It was the most logical thing he did!" Morrill exclaimed. "I've told you the situation was getting out of his hands. Didn't Lafe Kyle nearly shoot him? It's useless to think of now—but worse threatened. Why did he turn to Stevens for protection, instead of Sheriff Crotty? Simply because it never occurred to him that the man he had hired, and was paying good money, would turn against him, no matter what he happened to find out!"

The diabolical logic of it beat at the girl's whirling brain. Instinct warned her to rebel; but if Morrill's argument had a hole in it anywhere, Fern was unable to detect it. "What can we *do?*" she cried distractedly. "I'm not thinking simply of myself. But this—this bad dream is capable of ruining Father's name." A tear stole down her cheek. "I'll tell Mr. Crotty everything. We'll renounce those leases—replace the stolen stock. I'll do anything, if only—"

Morrill cast an absent glance backward at the Crow Track punchers, riding a respectable distance behind them, before he replied. "Afraid it's too late for that," he murmured regretfully. "With a posse taking the trail, things are bound

to happen. Men will talk—everything will come out, unless . . ."

"Unless what?" She hung on his reply.

Morrill appeared to be thinking deeply. A look of discovery crept into his eyes.

"If Uncle Dunk's will splits the Crow Track holdings between us, as you say, our hands are tied by law," he declared. "Stevens explained that. On the other hand, if those interests were united, there's a good chance that this whole rotten business might be squared, quickly and quietly."

"How united?" She was puzzled. "You mean if you and I are—?"

"Married. At once." He was firm. "Why, it's so simple I don't know why I never thought of it before!"

"No, Ranse. No!" Fern spoke positively, with vehemence, but her tone was distracted. "I couldn't consider it—just now."

"Well, I don't urge it, myself," he returned craftily. "It was just an idea to save Uncle Dunk—perhaps the only one that would. . . . Of course, we *may* get news at Bucktail that will make all this unnecessary, anyway." His look said that he didn't think so at all.

"Would it save Father?"

Ranse showed astonishment. "With the united power of his wealth behind us?"

He was counting on an entirely different influence from that power than that which his words implied. But Fern was too crushed to have perceived such a possibility. "Oh, it's such a terrible mixup! Could—could we be married in Bucktail?" she asked uncertainly, unaware that partial capitulation, at least, lay in the innocent query.

"Well, we owe it to ourselves, too, you know," he reminded, concealing his glee. "We'll be living here. The Pomerene name will hang over us always. Innocent or not, it could drag us down."

Fern declined further to express her own dazed sentiments on the subject of her father's reputation. But she was defeated, and he knew it.

"Come on." He urged his mount to a mended pace. "Good

intentions won't help Uncle Dunk a bit if we should reach Bucktail too late—"

She followed his lead, scarcely aware of being led. The heavy blows had fallen too quickly, one after another, for her to keep her balance. Surely Ranse could never have brought himself to speak as he did of his dead uncle unless it were all true?

She had always possessed her father's own stoutness of heart. It did not occur to her to question her loyalty to him now—or to shrink from it, regardless of the hard terms it might impose.

To Morrill's secret chagrin, on their arrival at Bucktail late in the evening, he learned that marriage here would be out of the question at least before the morrow, and possibly the following day. The justice of the peace had left town on business, and his wife, although she supplied them with a license when they called at nine o'clock, was not empowered to perform the ceremony.

"John'll be back tomorrow or Saturday," the obliging lady announced. "You folks better stay. I'm sure you can get rooms."

Morrill masked his bitter disappointment. "Midas is only thirty miles from here," he muttered as they left the house. "We could be there by morning—"

"But it's here that news from the mesa will come," Fern demurred firmly. "We really have no choice, Ranse. Won't tomorrow or next day do?"

She would willingly have put it off forever, had that been possible. Morrill swallowed his rising temper. It was possible yet to crowd her too far.

He procured her a room with an elderly dressmaker, ate a silent meal before those dazed golden eyes, and spent the waiting hours with the two punchers he had cannily kept by him to serve as witnesses.

Next morning, the absent justice failed to materialize. As the hours dragged on, Morrill gazed worriedly toward Uncompahgre Peak. What was happening out there? Would

the posse come riding back before he could consummate his master play?

Once united by marriage to the mistress of Crow Track, he could command every defense afforded by law or by what was even more powerful, the inclination of gallant Westerners. Lenience toward Fern Pomerene's husband would be their first thought, or so he believed; yet Morrill was desperately afraid some foolish mischance might wreck his fine plan at the critical moment.

Late in the afternoon he came running into the house where the girl was staying, forgetting even to knock in his eagerness.

"What luck!" he exclaimed richly. "Come on. The circuit rider's here. Just got in. We've got our license, and we can be married inside of half an hour!"

Scarcely aware of what she was doing, Fern rose and hastened after him.

A dusty, gaunt-faced, clerical-looking gentleman, newly arrived in Bucktail on his swing through the mountains to preach the gospel in isolated communities, the Reverend Isaiah Potter met Ranse's breathless and importunate request without astonishment.

"This is rather sudden," he pronounced austerely. "But ranch folks are apt to be that way. This marriage is by your full and express consent, young lady?" He bent his solemn gaze on Fern's bloodless face.

"Ye—yes," she assented falteringly.

"She's a little nervous, of course, as they all are," Morrill put in, with a chuckle. "I am myself."

It was arranged that the ceremony would take place within twenty minutes, under the spruce trees beside the little creek a few yards below the end of the street. Mr. Potter insisted on a few minutes' preparation—which meant brushing up—and Morrill hurried away to collect his witnesses.

Alone, Fern waited sadly beside the stream, trying desperately not to think. She knew she dared not, if she was to

go through with this travesty. If only she could have had advice, the sober counsel of one person alone, before—

"Here we are, all set," her cousin said, with suppressed elation, as he, the circuit rider, and the Crow Track punchers appeared through the trees. "I know Mr. Potter will excuse my impatience!"

They took their positions, facing the minister. To Fern, the hallowed opening words rolled out, inexpressibly solemn, irrevocable as fate.

"Do you, Fern, take this man, Ransom," the Reverend Potter asked, "for your wedded husband, to—"

An interruption occurred. The spruce boughs swished as several quiet men stepped forward. Morrill was given an unceremonious shove, and another man took his place beside the girl, a man with flashing eyes and set, determined jaw.

"Not him, Reverend," a clear young voice stated flatly. "He's best man. I'm the man she's marrying!"

With a gasp, Fern turned. To her amazement she found herself looking into the steady, challenging eyes of Dale Marlin. Something within her bounded, seeming almost to burst her breast.

"Dale—Dale!" she breathed chokingly, with blind, overwhelming gladness.

"What's this?" The Reverend Potter looked annoyed, his finger marking the place in his book. His glance fell on Pat Stevens' bronzed face and noted the rugged sincerity of Ezra and Sam.

"It's all right, Reverend," Pat assured him quietly. "You've got the right man now. Fire ahead!"

Morrill would have protested violently, but he seemed to be choking over something one of the newcomers had jammed into his back. It was Pat, and Ranse showed no inclination to argue with him. The Crow Track hands were equally undesirous of special attention, under Ezra's condemning glance.

"And you, young lady?" Mr. Potter inquired solemnly.

"This is the man of my choice," she whispered, happiness

transfiguring her face. "Hurry, Reverend, before anything ever changes it!"

The service continued, with heightened solemnity. Standing straight as a ramrod, Marlin heard himself pronounced the husband of Fern, whose radiance left no doubt that the fact won her unequivocal approval.

It was over so soon that it left them a little dazed. The Reverend Potter shook hands with Marlin heartily.

"Congratulations, young man," he said. "I reckon God would understand, but I hope you'll be able to forgive my mistake about the identity of the groom!"

"It was a mistake, all right," Pat said grimly. "The kind of a ring Morrill is going to be fitted for will be a lot different—one of those that fits on his wrist, and he'll be lucky if he escapes one that goes around his neck!"

Fern looked suddenly stricken. "No, Pat, no!" she got out. "I'm afraid you're mistaken . . . What will this do to Father?" she whispered, staring at Marlin.

"You mean your getting married?" Pat caught her up. "Mrs. Marlin, it'll do him honor. That grand oldtimer'd be glad if he could know."

"But Ranse swore—"

"Morrill? I'll bet he did—fast and convincing . . . No matter! Taggart kicked his meat house into kindling." Tersely he related the events on the range. "Dunk Pomerene is in the clear—it's Morrill who's guilty as hell. And now he'll face it!"

She whirled on Ranse with terrible eyes. "So Dale was right, and you—*you*—were responsible for Father's death!" she exclaimed hotly. "I heard you quarreling with him in his room the day of his death. It was about money—as your quarrels always were. He suspected you, and was brave enough to hire Pat Stevens to prove or disprove the worst. I tried to believe I was mistaken, but I understand now!"

Morrill snarled at them all impartially. He was washed up, and knew it.

Pat waved a hand. "Turn him over to Crotty," he directed. "That must be him now, coming with the other prisoners.

. . . Or hold on a minute." He stepped out to watch as Crotty rode forward curiously, a string of bound men in his wake.

"Just in time, Crotty." Pat nodded and turned to Sam and Marlin. "Sorry to rake up old matters, but this is a pinch, sort of. Which of these blacklegs were after Marlin, the night he first came to our camp?"

With some puzzlement, Sam stepped out to indicate two of the mounted prisoners and, a moment later, a third.

"That's them—"

Pat coolly stepped to their sides and began to rifle their pockets. He did not appear surprised to extract from the three a roll of bills which he counted with satisfaction.

"Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight hundred," he finished, and handed the sum over to Sloan, who took it openmouthed.

"What's this?" Sam demanded blankly.

"Why, the money for your Bar ES horses—the money one of them lifted from a bedroll in our wagon the night they looked it over, searching for Marlin . . . That's right, ain't it?" he snapped sharply at the renegades.

Their sullen, hangdog looks gave corroboration in full.

"An' yuh knew they was carryin' it all this while?" exploded Sam wrathfully. "No wonder yuh was so determined to stay on this range!"

Pat's nod was superbly casual. "Got it back for you, didn't I? If you two are going to start worrying at this late date about my management of your money, after this you can take charge of it yourselves."

Sam would have argued further, but Ezra cut him off. The old fellow could show a rough polish on occasion, and he rose to it now. "Yuh saved yore hide this time by the skin of yore teeth, Stevens," he drawled. "Mebby it don't matter so much anyhow. We won't have some o' this money ourselves," he added, with a broad wink for Marlin and Fern, "much longer'n it takes to buy a sizable weddin' present."

Sam fell into his mood at once, a speculative glint in his eye. "Now you're talkin'. What *is* the sensible thing?" he

queried, with mock seriousness. "Say a silver-mounted saddle suitable fer a small boy, mebby?"

"No mebby about it!" Ezra caught him up with unction. "Once in a while, yuh little runt, yuh show some glimmerin's o' sense. This time yuh took the words right out o' my mouth!"

The blush that mantled Fern Marlin's cheeks, enlivening the golden eyes mirroring so much happiness, said that she hoped they were right.

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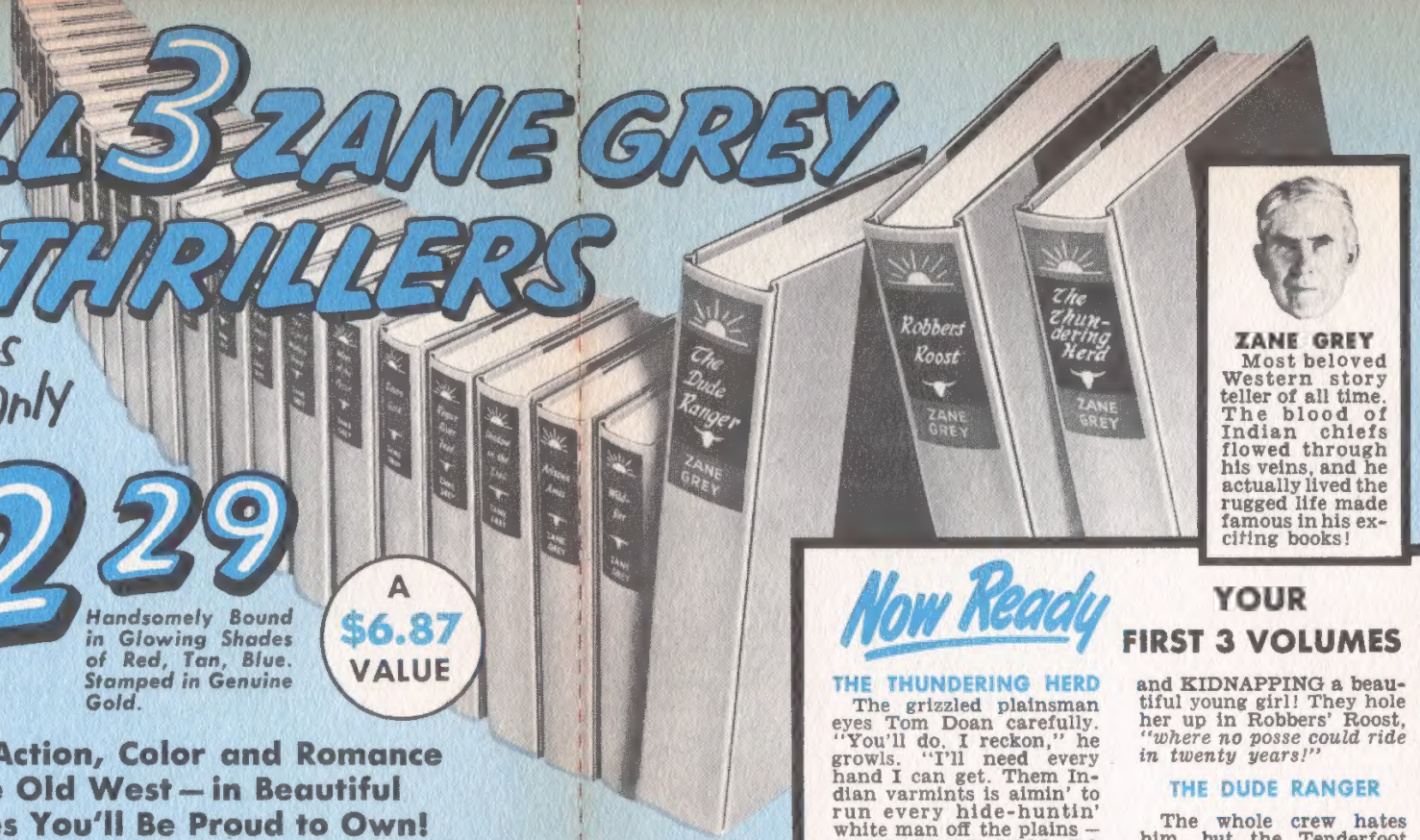

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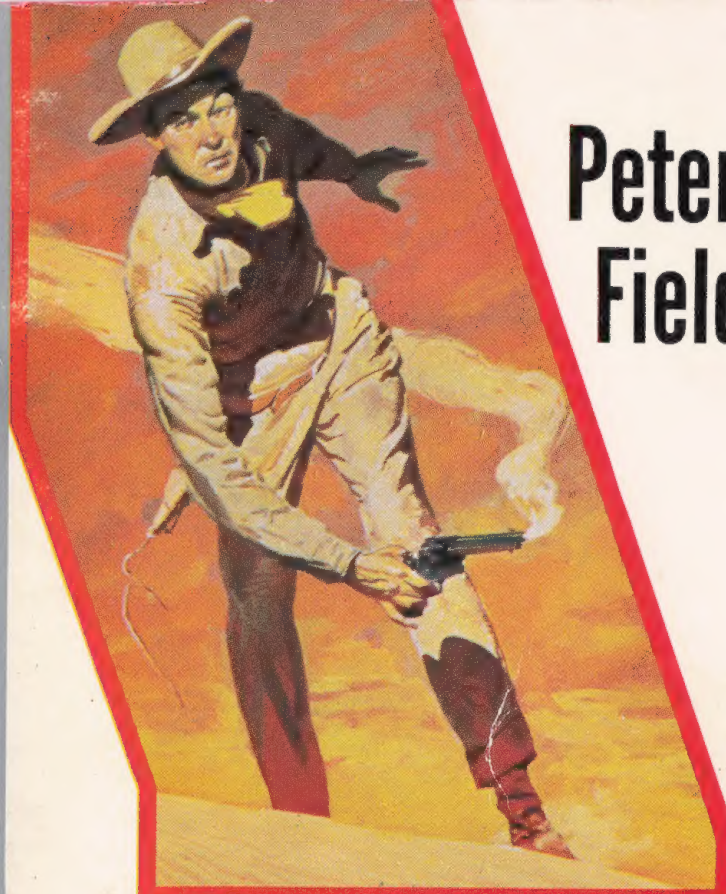

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